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DISCLAIMER/CLARIFICATION

First of all, thank you for reading this book if you are here! I really appreciate it! There are some things I need to clarify first, though.

1.) Carnelian is in the Jade Winglet, but not Umber. I left him out because I just don't like his character in general. I feel like Tui just used him as a space filler, and I wouldn't be using Carnelian either for this reason, but she does have a semi-important role to play, so I decided to keep her in.

2.) A lot of things are the same from WoF, but some are also different. Hailstorm has still been missing for years, and got captured just like it told in book 7. Moonwatcher of course still has her powers too. Some things are different though, like obviously Carnelian isn't dead in this story. Also, the dragons in this story have breaks from school like us humans do, like Winter break, Spring break, etc. And, they mostly walk on two legs, also like people. They still look like dragons, though; this isn't the kind of thing where they are humans, because no offense, but I hate those kinds of stories.

3.) I may include OCs in this story. I already have a couple in mind, and if you would like yours to be featured, let me know and I will think about it.

4.) This is NOT A SEQUEL to Frigid Shadows, my first Winterwatcher fan fiction, so you don't have to read it to know what's going on in this story.

With that out of the way, let the story begin!

❄Chapter 1: Jade Mountain Academy❄

Winter felt like he'd been flying for hours, his ice blue wings aching from exhaustion. His sister Icicle flew ahead and to the left of him, not showing any signs of fatigue, if she was even feeling tired at all. He made sure to do the same; true IceWings never showed that they were in pain, no matter how much it hurt. At least, that's what his parents always told him.

They had left the Ice Kingdom at dawn, Tundra and Narwhal - their two overbearing parents - insisting that they stay at the newly opened Jade Mountain Academy for a few years. When Winter had asked why, they had simply said it would build character, and that it was a good opportunity to invoke fear into other dragons as much as possible. He wasn't so sure about the first part, but the part about fear definitely sounded like them. Or maybe those were both just excuses they came up with and really only wanted their dragonets out of their lives for awhile.

Winter knew exactly why they were sending him in particular; he was the most disappointing and worthless out of their three dragonets, one of which having been captured by a SkyWing patrol years ago, while the War of SandWing Succession was still going strong. He had let his older brother Hailstorm get captured, flying away as they knocked him unconscious and dragged him off to wherever he was now, if he was even alive at all. He knew Hailstorm had only been trying to protect him, but his parents - and frankly, the entirety of his tribe - has never seen it that way.

However, it was strange that Icicle would be attending as well. Over the years, Winter had figured out why his parents seemed to value her almost as much as Hailstorm. She was destined to take over the throne of the IceWing queen someday; to challenge Queen

Glacier, perhaps the most ruthless queen in Pyrrhia apart from Scarlet of the SkyWings, who had forced her prisoners to fight to the death in her sickening arena while she was still in power. Not only would Icicle becoming queen grant their parents access to the Ice Kingdom's vast fortune, but it would make their ranks skyrocket as well. Which made it strange that they were sending her off to the academy, instead of training her to fight for the position of queen when the time came.

"How much longer do you think it'll be until we get there?" Winter asked, hoping she could hear him over the wind resistance.

"I dunno, maybe another half hour?" she called back. "The sun isn't too high over the horizon, and we're already halfway through the Kingdom of Sand."

Yeah, and I'm already sweating my scales off, he thought miserably, wiping the slick substance from his forehead with the back of a talon, shielding his eyes from the beating sun the other. He looked at the white moon globe floating over his shoulder, the one thing to remind him of home right now. Then again, home wasn't always the greatest. Apart from constantly talking to him about the rankings, his parents weren't involved much in his life, and his father was abusive at times, especially if he was angry. That was the only thing good about this; he wouldn't have to worry about them for awhile. *How can those sand-sniffing reptiles enjoy it here? It's just an endless ocean of sand. And a scorching hot one at that. I hope I don't get paired with one. The advertisement for this academy said we would be sharing a cave with at least one other dragon, and that most of the winglets or whatever they're called have one dragon from each tribe. SandWings are treasure-hoarding, no-good, law-breaking sidewinders; the only thing worse than getting paired with one would be getting paired with those black-hearted snakes that call themselves NightWings. More like LightWings; they're all so frail and unhealthy-looking from the years they spent living on that volcano. I could probably lift one over my head; that's how malnourished they are. They deserve it, for killing our last Animus. Our tribe could've been perfect, but of course they stole it all away from us!*

He had never actually *seen* a NightWing in person before, but from what he'd heard, he never wanted to, unless it was to slice their

throat open. Their tribe was known for their history of lies, starting with Foeslayer. She had approached Queen Diamond, the current queen of the IceWings back then, offering peace between their tribes in exchange for Prince Arctic, his tribe's last Animus. The queen had agreed, however like they always did, the NightWings stabbed them in the back. Arctic had dragonets while he was staying with them, and then if that wasn't bad enough, what did they do? Murdered him in cold blood. Then there was Darkstalker, the dragon who had tried to take over his tribe and probably the rest of them after that. That was hundreds of years ago, though. However, their streak of betrayal didn't stop there. The rats had lied about having their "powers" of mind reading and seeing the future, and had also created a fake prophecy several years ago. Luckily, those powers had proved to be false; they were just excellent at pretending to read minds and making up fake fortunes.

It wasn't long before Winter could see Jade Mountain in the distance. There appeared to be some sort of platform set up on its rocky face, dragons of all different colors and tribes swarming on top of it, as well as more that were landing.

Great. Thirty-three other dragons from other tribes sharing the same oxygen as me for the next...who knows how long? Some of them are probably only half my age. I can practically smell the immaturity. I'm already depressed enough; I can't see this making it any better.

Once they were close enough to see the finer details of some of the dragons, Icicle stopped and hovered in midair, twirling around to face him.

"Remember what Mother and Father told us," she said. "Only speak to dragons from other tribes if you have to, or if it's to learn their weaknesses. Scowl at anyone that looks at you sideways or steps too close. And most importantly, *never* interact with NightWings unless it's absolutely necessary."

"I got it, you don't have to recite it every five minutes," Winter replied, earning a whack from one of her wings. "Let's just go and get this over with."

The royal duo touched down on the wooden landing platform like

everyone else had, dragons quickly parting for them. He smirked as they purposely steered clear, but quickly wiped it from his face. As little emotion as possible, just like his parents told him. It appeared that the Dragonets of Destiny were somehow able to carve a flat surface into the side of the mountain, about thirty feet by thirty feet, leading up to a large opening into the school. Rumor had it that this was the mountain they'd grown up under, but that was just superstition.

Winter advanced toward the entrance, pushing past anyone too ignorant to move out of the way. He glared at anyone who looked at him for too long, but made sure not to do that same thing. The crowd fell into a hushed stillness as they walked by, only slight whispers audible.

"They look important," somebody said from his left.

"Yeah, especially the smaller one," another dragon replied, referring to Icicle. "She's kinda cute too, in a scary sort of way."

"I think one of them just looked at me!" a different dragon squealed. "No, not the girl; the handsome, sparkly one. Do you think he looked at me?"

Winter was curious about their reactions. They acted like it was a rare occurrence to see an IceWing. Then again, most of his tribe preferred to stay in the Ice Kingdom, where no other tribes dared venture, so it was likely that it was many of these dragons' first time seeing one in person.

He was almost to the entrance when a faint glimmer caught his eye. Glancing to his right, he saw a small female NightWing standing off to the side with a larger dragon who looked to be her mother, away from the rest of the crowd. He'd already seen a few of her tribe here, but what got his attention was her appearance.

Her scales were a dark, ebony black, richer in color than any of the other NightWings he had seen so far, yet some faint traces of blue and green were visible in the bright sunlight. Her eyes were a beautiful jade green, and next to each of them was a silver, teardrop-shaped scale that glittered like snow. She was clearly

much healthier than the other NightWings here; he couldn't see her ribs, which wasn't typical among most of her kind.

Wow...I never knew a NightWing could look so astonishing...

She quickly caught his gaze and gave him a sharp glare, before looking away. Something, that for once in his life, he couldn't bring himself to do.

He didn't realize he'd stopped walking until his sister jammed an elbow into his side and pushed him forward with a look that could shatter glass. A few nearby dragons snickered and giggled at him, and he could feel the blood rushing to his face.

He hissed at one of them, a SeaWing, that was close to him. They immediately quieted and looked away, as did the rest of them.

Winter knew his spikes were standing on edge, like they always did when he got riled up. Taking a deep breath, he calmed himself and slipped inside the entrance to the school, hoping everybody outside would forget about that whole ordeal momentarily.

"What was that?" Icicle snarled. "We were doing great until you stopped to stare at that *NightWing*!" She said NightWing like it was a curse word, which it practically was, at least to their tribe.

He shrugged. "Is it against the law to look at someone?"

"No, but it makes us look bad when you sit there gawking at them! Come on; and this time don't let your eyes magnetize to anyone else." She stormed away from him and approached a table set up against the wall, where yet another NightWing sat examining two large scrolls. This one wasn't nearly as pretty as the one he'd seen outside, though.

What am I thinking?! None of them are pretty! They're conniving lairs, that's what they are. All of them! he thought, following Icicle.

"Oh! Hello!" the dragon at the table greeted them as they approached. "IceWings! I haven't seen many of you yet today. Names, please? You *are* students, right? I mean, you'd be pretty young to be-"

"Princess Icicle and Prince Winter," his sister said in a curt tone. "And yes, we are students. Unfortunately."

"Ooh, royalty!" the NightWing replied. "Alright, I'll find your names here...I'm Fatespeaker, by the way. Not a Dragonet of Destiny. Well, sort of, but it's a long story. I mainly just help out here whenever I can, particularly with Starflight, since he has trouble getting around on his own. Okay then, Winter - I mean, *Prince* Winter," she corrected once he narrowed his eyes at her, "you are in the Jade Winglet. See those three tunnels over there?" She pointed to three large tunnels at the farthest wall of this much larger entrance camber. "Go down the one on the far right. It'll branch off into two smaller tunnels, and again, take a right. You'll see three caves; that's where your winglet will be staying. They're each labeled with letters; you will be in cave C. Two dragons per cave, no more, no less."

While the perky NightWing explained to Icicle where she'd be, Winter took a moment to visually explore the cavern they were in. It looked large enough to hold fifty dragons, room for more to fly above. The rocks had a sort of golden hue as the sunlight spilled in from outside, and stalagmites and stalactites grew from the ground and hung from the ceiling, connecting to form large pillars in some places. On the left wall, the one opposite him, had a medium-sized stage carved into it, although it was empty apart from some kind of podium. The rest of the cavern was empty as well, apart from a huge gong imbetween two of the tunnels. He wasn't sure how the place was so well lit by only sunlight, but then looked up and saw many multicolored fire globes hanging from stalactites.

I guess they didn't want it to look all depressing with plain old torches everywhere.

"Enjoy your time here!" Fatespeaker suddenly said, telling Winter she and Icicle had finished talking. His sister was already walking off to the middle tunnel.

"Which winglet are you in?" he asked when he caught up with her, trying to show minimal interest.

"Gold," she replied, ruffling her spikes. "I can't believe we're going

to be stuck here with obnoxious, immature dragons from other tribes. Let's just try to make the most out of our time here and learn each tribe's weaknesses and strengths so we can exploit and counter them when we need to."

"Agreed."

They quickly parted ways down their separate tunnels. As Winter walked down the brightly lit hallway - also with fire globes - he felt his horns snag on something. Looking up, he saw some kind of quote on a piece of driftwood hanging from the roof of the tunnel. There were more too, equally spaced throughout the length of the passageway. This one had been hanging lower than the rest, resulting in his horns getting caught in the string.

The pale blue IceWing growled in frustration as his efforts to untangle himself only make things worse. Eventually he resorted to simply ripping the string. A SandWing farther down the tunnel snickered at his misfortune, but quickly stopped, ducking as Winter hurled the sign at their head with a fierce glare. It didn't connect, but they got the message. Hopefully.

He proceeded to continue down the tunnel, reading a few of the quotes as he passed them. It took no time at all to reach the fork in the tunnel, and he continued down the one on the right, just like Fatespeaker instructed. He came upon the three caves, most of them quiet, which told him that most of his winglet wasn't here yet. At least, that's what he was praying. He wanted to savor the time he had left without them while he still could.

Winter found cave C, the one farthest right. He dimmed his moon globe as far as he could, the fire globes providing adequate light. He wasn't expecting anyone to be in his cave yet, no sound coming from it. However, when he peeked inside, those expectations exploded right in his face.

You've got to be kidding me. They paired me up. With a NIGHTWING.

And not just any NightWing, but the one who had caught his eye outside.

Dun dun duuuunnnn! I guess. XD. Anyway, hope you enjoyed the first chapter of this story, spread the word to anyone else you know who loves Winterwatcher fanfics, or just loves WoF in general. Also, if anyone remembers the saying that Winter's father always used to tell him, PLEASE let me know in the comments. I can never remember it; all I know right now is that I think part of it is Stay Vigilant or something. Cataclysm138, out!

⬤Chapter 2: Clawmates⬤

[image]

Forgot to mention that Winter doesn't have his scavenger in this story. Also, I didn't put a picture of a crocodile up there for no reason...😋. I bet a few of you will figure it out.

No way, Moon thought. *I pray to the moons that this IceWing just made a wrong turn or something.*

The ice blue dragon standing at the doorway to the cave double checked the letter next to it, muttering something under his breath as he did so. Then, without a word, he entered, walking over the opposite side of the cave to where a large rocky ledge was carved into the stone wall. He used his frostbreath to coat the surface in a sheet of glittering ice, then layed down on his side and turning so he was facing the wall instead of her.

Well, looks like this is my clawmate. Not exactly the talkative type, but neither am I. That's good. Probably. He looks so familiar though...wait! That's the IceWing I saw at the entrance to the school!

When they'd locked eyes earlier, she had quickly hissed and broken their gazes, hoping it told him that she wasn't afraid of him. Which was not exactly the truth. Her mother had reminded her after that to stay safe, and although she didn't specifically mention IceWings, Moon knew that like the rest of her tribe, she wasn't fond of the icy beings.

I wish I could've stayed just one more year in the rainforest; I miss Mom already. We were only able to spend a couple of years together

before this academy opened, and now I'm stuck here, in a cold cave, in a school full of rambunctious, noisy dragons. It doesn't help that I have these stupid powers to hide...

Instead of focusing on the negatives about this situation, Moonwatcher went back to reading the scroll she had been paying attention to before her clawmate arrived. Some good news was that there was a nice little scroll rack in the corner, five scrolls set on each of its two shelves. Several minutes ago, she had been looking through the titles, and had found ones about military strategy and other things that she now realized were obvious hints that she was partnered with an IceWing. Those ones were pretty sophisticated, even for someone at her reading level. She was only four, but had probably read more scrolls than the rest of the NightWings in the rainforest combined.

She was resting on a pile of moss and leaves that had been here when she entered, having created a makeshift bed. It felt just like the forest floor, where she had stayed secretly hidden for many months during the times when Secretkeeper had to be at the volcano with the rest of her tribe. It felt like home.

Moon tried to remain intently focused on her reading, and not the minds of the other dragons nearby, however with someone else only a few feet away, their thoughts were strong and spiky, and easily caught the attention of *her* mind.

...can't believe I have to share a cave with a NightWing. I can't ask for my own cave either; there's only three here, and the other two are almost certainly occupied by now. Stupid Dragonets of Destiny, coming up with the idea of merging dragons from different tribes...

Clearly this newcomer wasn't very excited about being here, either. A few silent minutes passed before one of them finally spoke.

"Where did you get that map?" the IceWing asked gruffly.

Moon quickly looked up from her scroll. "W-what?"

"The *map* that you have," he replied. "The one right next to you."

"Oh. Fatespeaker gave it to me. You know, the NightWing at the-"

"I know who she is," he interrupted. "Never met someone more obnoxiously talkative than her. I'm just wondering why I didn't get one." He walked over to pick it up, unfolding it to examine the layout of the school that was sketched on it.

"Maybe they only gave out one per cave," Moon suggested. "They might be in short supply. Did you at least get a schedule?"

The pale blue dragon shook his head. "What about you?"

She nudged a second piece of paper toward him with her tail.

As he looked over it, he frowned even more than he already had been.

We have ALL of our classes together? His mind roared, while the rest of him stayed silent. *As if things weren't bad enough already...*

Moon had no idea why IceWings hated her tribe so much; all she knew was that things had been this way for a long, long time, and it didn't seem like it was going to change anytime soon. Maybe she could at least *try* and be friends with this one, though.

"My name is Moon," she suddenly blurted. "Well, Moonwatcher, but you can just call me Moon, since it's shorter. What's your name?"

His blue eyes narrowed, appearing to be studying her expression.

Mother and Father said not to talk to NightWings unless I have to...so does that mean I shouldn't tell her my name? We will have to know each other's names to communicate though...why is she looking at me like that?

Moon quickly tore her eyes away from him, realizing she must've been staring a little too long.

"My name's Winter. *Prince* Winter."

"Your mother is Queen Glacier?!" she cried in astonishment.

"No, of course not!" he replied in a sharp tone. "She's my aunt, so even though she isn't my mother, me and my siblings are still royalty."

"Oh. That still sounds really nice, to be part of the royal bloodline."

Winter snorted as he handed back the schedule and walked over to his ledge. "You'd change your mind if you walked a day in my scales, NightWing, I can tell you that much."

"What do you mean?"

He didn't reply.

BONG! BONG! BONG!

Moon sat up at the sound of the gong echoing from the Great Hall, gathering her map and schedule. Winter was alert as well, seeming to not know what the gong was for.

"That means we have three minutes to get to class," she informed him. "Two gongs means two minutes, one gong means one. Do you need the map? I've already memorized most of it."

The IceWing rolled his eyes. "No, I don't need a piece of paper to tell me where to go! I know exactly how to get there."

"Do you even know which class we have first?"

He nodded. "Hunting."

At least he got that right.

Moon took the map with her, just in case she got lost. Winter had already left the cave, the strange orb that had been floating over his shoulder left on his icy ledge. She followed him out of their winglet's section and further down the original tunnel it branched off from, but soon realized he was frequently looking behind him to make sure he was still going the same way as her.

"You sure you don't need the map?"

He replied with an angry huff, turning down a separate tunnel.

"That's the wrong way!" she called.

"I don't care!" he responded.

She smiled to herself, wondering how long it would take him to find his way to class.

BONG!

One minute already?! I didn't even hear the second gong!

The small NightWing hurried to hunting class, and miraculously wasn't late. She entered a small cave, only a little bigger than her own, where she found five other dragons sitting in a circle on the floor. The back wall of the cave was entirely gone, although an aqua-green curtain was hung in front of it, turning the sunlight blue-green as it poured inside.

"Hello!" a large, deep blue SeaWing greeted her, one of the dragons in the circle. "You must be Moonwatcher! Glad you made it on time; come sit with us."

"Okay," she said softly, her head starting to ache from all of the thoughts in the room.

She starting walking over to where a dark red SkyWing was sitting, however when they curled their lips up slightly to reveal two rows of razor-sharp teeth, she decided otherwise. Instead, she picked a spot next to a RainWing even smaller than she was.

"Hi!" the multicolored dragon greeted cheerfully. "I love the little silver scales by your eyes! They're so pretty!"

"Oh," Moon said, uncomfortable with the amount of energy practically radiating from this dragon. "T-thank you."

However, despite her friendly demeanor, the RainWing's thoughts were the opposite of that.

Oh mangoes! Why did she have to sit by ME? I guess it is better than sitting by Carnelian, but I've already spent too much time around NightWings...I hope my PTSD doesn't kick in, because that would NOT make for a great first day of school.

"You don't happen to know where Winter is, do you?" the blue SeaWing asked. She must've been Tsunami; Moon could tell by the pattern under her wings belonging to only the royal SeaWing family. "You guys are clawmates, right?"

Before Moon could answer, that very same IceWing walked in through the entrance to the small cave.

"Speak of the devil," Tsunami said. "You're five minutes late, Winter, and on the first day. Don't let it happen again. I'll let it slide though, since you probably just made a wrong turn somewhere. Come sit down."

He hesitated for a moment, before sitting down next to Carnelian, across from Moon. She saw the red dragon growl softly at him, and he replied by shooting a small blast of frostbreath next her tail and snarling at her. Carnelian didn't look scared in the slightest, although she did scoot away from him by a few inches. There was a pale yellow SandWing on her other side, trembling while trying to contain his laughter.

"Take it easy, everyone," Tsunami warned. "Especially you two. Now, since we're all new here today and some of you probably don't know each other, we're going to go around in a circle and say our names and something about us. Winter, since you were the last one to arrive, how about *you* start?"

Winter grumbled something under his breath. "I'm Winter, and I'm the nephew of Queen Glacier."

"Wow!" Kinkajou exclaimed. "You're a prince? That sounds like it would be a lot of fun!"

Moon resisted the urge to squint her eyes shut at the sudden burst of pain resulting from the explosion of thoughts in the RainWing's head.

Remember what Mom said; stay secret, stay hidden stay safe.

"I'll go next," Tsunami declared. "Most of you know me, but if you don't, I'm Tsunami. Not to brag, but I'm one of the Dragonets of Destiny. Anyway, Turtle over there is my brother," she pointed to a kelp green SeaWing across the circle from her, "and apparently, I have thirty others, and I just found that out this morning."

Some parents she has, the SandWing next to Carnelian thought.

Moon noticed all eyes in the room on her, and wondered why, until she realized it was her turn to speak.

"Oh, um...I'm Moonwatcher, but I prefer Moon, and, uh...I grew up in the rainforest, not on the volcano like most NightWings."

"So *that's* why you look so much healthier than the other NightWings here!" Kinkajou realized. "Okay, my name is Kinkajou, and I am obsessed with sloths. Not even going to lie, I completely adore them! They're just so cute, with their little claws and everything! Your turn, Turtle!"

"Oh, me?" He asked, seeming to have been dozing off. "Hm...I have this cool wristband," he said, raising his right arm to show off a golden band locked around it, with six shiny black stones set in it. "I made it myself, actually."

Moon didn't pay attention to anything he said after that, her mind locked on one thing. And that thing was that she couldn't read his . It was just some sort of fuzzy blankness pushing her back whenever she tried to listen. Occasionally a word or two would slip out, but nothing more than that.

How can that be? I've never met anyone like that! Even when Mom shields her thoughts from me, it doesn't feel like this.

She only payed attention to the last two dragons for their names, puzzling over this new realization instead. The SandWing was Qibli, and the SkyWing was Carnelian. Moon noticed that Qibli had a small scar on his snout, and an amber earring on one of his ears.

"Okay, now that we have that done, it's time to go hunting!"

Tsunami said. "Most winglets only go hunting once a week, but you guys and the Copper Wingelt go hunting twice. And yes, we know that's extra work, so as a small privilege, if you want to save something you catch for yourself, there's a special spot in the prey center where you can put it. No one else is allowed to touch anything that's there. Everybody needs to catch something, and if it's small, like a lizard, it needs to be at least three of them. Once we finish, we'll bring everything to the prey center. Let's go! Oh, by the way, this is your only class since it's your first day, but tomorrow you have all of them."

The large SeaWing proceeded to pull the curtain covering the absent wall aside, flying outside and beckoning for them to do the same.

Moon stood up and started to walk over to the opening, however was elbowed aside by Carnelian.

"Watch it, NightWing," the angry SkyWing snarled.

"Sorry..." Moon muttered.

"How about *you* watch it next time?" Winter said, more of a statement than a question. Moon was surprised that he came to her aid, however it could've just been that he and the red dragon still weren't on friendly terms and he wanted to keep it that way.

"What'd you say to me?" Carnelian hissed, whirling around and flaring her large wings.

"You heard me, *SkyWing*," he retorted, shoving past her and flying out of the cave.

Rather than chasing after him like Moon thought she would, she continued to pester her.

"Bet it feels good to have your stupid boyfriend come to the rescue," she spat. "What are you going to do if you get in trouble and he isn't there to save you," she mocked, pressing the tip of a claw into her chest. "Nothing, because you clearly can't stand up for yourself."

The SkyWing prepared to take off, but Moon decided right then that she wasn't going to take this sitting down.

"For your information, I had to survive in the rainforest on my own for *months* when my mother wasn't around," she said with a glare. "I could've been eaten alive, could've starved, died from illness or something, but I didn't, because I was able to fend for myself. How about you think about that next time you try to push me around?"

Carnelian's mouth dropped open slightly, the shocked look on her face telling Moon that not many dragons had talked back to her before. Without another word, the NightWing flapped her star-speckled wings and took off, waiting until she was out of the SkyWing's sight before letting a grin spread across her face.

I can't believe I just did that! That felt so...good! Maybe Winter saw...why do I care though? He's been nothing but rude to me so far. Then again, he did stand up to Carnelian back there when she pushed me...

Where was he? Tsunami was still impatiently waiting for everyone to fly out, but he seemed to have left to go hunt already.

Moon flew upward and ended up on the side of the mountain, scanning the rocky cliffs and grassy hills for anything bright and shiny. She didn't see him anywhere, but he was an IceWing, so he probably wouldn't be looking for mammals that live in mountainous areas.

Her thoughts left the subject when she spotted two white mountain goats jumping from rock to rock as they scaled the mountain. One of them was much lower than the other, and the one higher up had paused to wait for it. An unsuspecting target. Perfect.

The NightWing flew up high enough so that she would reach the waiting goat by gliding; she didn't want it to hear her wingbeats and get startled.

Letting the wind current carry her, she silently glided several meters above her prey. She waited until the second goat was almost

to the level of the one higher up, then broke into a well-executed dive and scooped the one waiting off of the side of the mountain with outstretched talons. It instantly began bleating, however its cries didn't last long. Moon quickly snapped its neck, and its struggling body went limp.

"Nice job, Moon!" Tsunami called from below. She looked down and saw that the SeaWing had been observing her while she hunted. Moon was glad she hadn't seen her earlier; she didn't do well with...pretty much anything when she was being watched.

I still don't see Winter...where could he be?

"Hey, Moon," Qibli said, suddenly appearing in front of her. She nearly dropped the goat she was holding, she was so startled. "Oops! Sorry if I scared you. Just wanted to say it was cool - and kind of hilarious - when you talked to Carnelian back there," he told her with a smile.

"Oh," she replied. "Glad you think so. Have you seen Winter anywhere?"

His happy expression faltered for a moment, and she wondered why. He quickly fixed it, though. "I think he went down near the beach to fish for something. Anyway, I better go find some prey and fast, otherwise Tsunami won't be happy with me. See you later!"

Moon watched him fly away for a moment, then headed toward the beach to see if she could find Winter there. It wasn't until she was getting close that she realized she had no idea why she wanted to see him. Maybe it was to thank him, but she felt like it might be that she wanted to be in his presence, which was strange. Then, she could suddenly feel his mind, although it was very faint.

...need a weapon, need a weapon, need a weapon...this is bad! That thing came out of nowhere! Ow! There's a rock; it's not much but it's all I've got right now.

She immediately dropped her goat carcass, trying to locate him based on how strong his thoughts sounded.

Winter was in trouble.

Sorry to leave y'all on a cliffhanger, but you know how much I love to! I probably won't update this for a few days, because I'm going to start working on a new cover for this story. I'm not the best artist, but hopefully with the power of a YouTube walkthrough and the helpfulness of digital drawing, I can make one that you'll all really love. Cataclysm138, out!

❄Chapter 3❄

At the time of me writing this, I'm not sure if this chapter will have a title or not. I'll probably think of one as I'm writing, but anyway, this is in Winter's POV, as shown by the snowflake emoji. The chapter is in Moon's POV if there's a moon emoji in the title, if you haven't caught on.

Water. No oxygen. Searing pain in his back leg. A dark blue tint to the water that wasn't there when Winter had first entered the ocean. Those were four of the main things burning in his mind as he fought against his reptilian attacker. The last one: survive.

He had calmly been searching for any kind of aquatic creature to hunt just over a minute ago, not far from the beach. He'd estimated that the water was only about up to his neck when he stood up straight, assuming he wouldn't have to worry about any large predators attacking. A foolish mistake. All of a sudden, he'd been yanked down into the water by a bulky mass of scales. It wasn't a dragon, but this was worse, since he'd never been trained to fight one. A saltwater crocodile.

Winter's vision was a blur of water and bubbles, his eyes stinging from the saltwater. He could only catch mere glimpses of the reptile as it constantly rammed into him and tried to lock its massive jaws around him. He couldn't let it, because if it did and spun him around in a so-called death roll, he would most likely pass out. And then, he would be food for the fishes. Or in this case, crocodile.

He felt its scaly tail brush against him from behind, and twirled around in time to dodge its set of razor-sharp teeth as they snapped shut right where his leg had been. It had already raked its claws across his leg when it had dragged him underwater, and it was like no pain he had ever felt before, so he didn't want to find out what it would feel like if it bit him.

Does frostbreath work underwater? Probably not; I would just freeze all the water around me. I need to get above the surface for that to work.

The reptile charged at him once more, this time from his left. Acting instinctively, Winter slashed his serrated claws across its side, the jagged points tearing bits of flesh out as he removed them. The creature let out some kind of muffled roar and immediately swam off, although he knew it would come back again for another strike. He used the opportunity to launch himself upward and above the water, coughing up seawater once he was able to do so. He scanned his surroundings for anything he could use to defend himself besides his claws, but only saw a rock sitting next to him, large enough to fit in his talon.

It's better than nothing, he thought as he picked it up.

And in the nick of time, too. No sooner had he clutched it in his talons than the crocodile came bursting out of the water, its jaws wide open as it prepared to clamp down on him. Winter slammed the stone into the side of its head, but it only made it more angry as it pushed him back underneath the water. Its teeth came racing for his throat, and he was barely able to force its jaws apart in time. The crocodile fought to close its mouth, its sharp claws digging into the sand and making the visibility worse. Winter's strength was quickly fading; he couldn't fight this thing for much longer on his own.

I swear, if I die to an overgrown lizard on the first day of school, I'm going to be more disappointed in myself than I already am.

The creature's weight pressing down on him suddenly lifted, and amid the swirling sand, tainted blue water, and the constant ringing in his ears, he saw a dark black shape and the pale brown crocodile struggling several feet away from him.

Winter fought his fatigue and broke the surface again, astonished to see Moonwatcher, the shy NightWing he was clawmates with, locked in combat with the viscious reptile.

Don't help her, she's a filthy, conniving NightWing! one part of him

screamed, while the other said *but you HAVE to, she just helped you!*

He listened to the second part.

Winter wasn't able to fly over since his wings were soaking wet, but he was a skilled swimmer, so he instead swam over to where Moon was holding the reptile's snapping teeth at bay. Before he could reach her, it knocked her underwater with its massive weight, and he knew it was about to go for the kill. He noticed its brown eyes, and that it had a vertical pupil. Vertical pupils belonged to animals with night vision and impressive eyesight, but that also made them extremely sensitive.

The IceWing acted without thinking, knowing if he didn't, Moon could - and probably would - be killed. He slammed into the crocodile's side as hard as he could, waiting for it to look straight at him before he stabbed a claw into one of its eyes. It worked, the creature letting out a shrill hiss and immediately diving into the water in an attempt to escape. He wasn't about to let it get away though, and it was wounded, which made it vulnerable. Winter thrust his talons underwater and yanked up when he felt them dig into scaly flesh. The reptile instantly opened its jaws wide, and he used his last remaining adrenaline to keep them that way, before blasting a jet of icy frostbreath from his throat. It went straight down the crocodile's, and within moments, it lay on its back floating on the surface of the water, dead.

He heard splashing in the water behind him and turned around, expecting to see some other giant creature with teeth approaching to check out the commotion. He was sort of right. In reality, it was the rest of his winglet and Tsunami, although Carnelian stayed closer to the shoreline.

"Are you alright?" Tsunami asked, grimacing as she saw the dark blue tint to the water. "Did that thing bite you?"

Winter lifted his wings above the water and shook the liquid off. "I'm fine. It just scratched me a little." He was able to hover in the air after his wings were mostly dry, revealing his wound as he did so.

"A little?" Qibli asked, wading closer to get a better look. "I wouldn't exactly call that 'a little'. You should probably see the nurse. Is there a nurse here?" he asked Tsunami.

"Of course!" she replied a bit angrily. "Do you think we would risk having a bunch of rowdy dragons from different tribes in the same place all day without a nurse?"

Below his knee on his right back leg were three long gashes, although they weren't very deep. Not deep enough to require stitches, at least. Winter knew this because everyone in the Ice Kingdom had to have some sort of medical training in case of injury, even if it wasn't very extensive. It still felt like a talonful of steaming sand had been shoved inside the wound, though, and blood was flowing freely from it.

"I don't need to see the nurse," he objected. "It's fine."

Tsunami rolled her eyes. "If you call an infection fine, then yes. You need to go to the nurse. They'll probably just put bandages on it and clean it out, but it's better than having to get your lower leg amputated. Someone needs to go with you, too."

"I'll go!" both Qibli and Kinkajou said at once.

The deep blue SeaWing princess shook her head. "Neither of you have found any prey yet. I would send Carnelian since she's already done-"

"Don't you dare send me with that frozen lizard that calls himself a prince!" the SkyWing called from the shore. Winter desperately wanted to fly over there and rip her throat out, but he resisted the temptation.

"But that's why I'm not going to," Tsunami growled. "How about you go with Winter, Moon?"

You're kidding, he thought, turning his gaze to the dripping wet NightWing hovering in the air a few feet away from him. *First they pair me up with her to be my clawmate, and now she has to escort me to the nurse?!*

"I'll take my chances with the SkyWing," he replied.

"I didn't ask who you wanted to go with, Winter," Tsunami shot back. "Moon, I'll make sure someone brings your kill to the prey center; just make sure Winter gets to the nurse. I don't care what you have to do to get him there, just do it."

"R-really?" she asked with a slight stutter. "Wouldn't Kinkajou be better for this? She doesn't seem to have a problem with anyone..."

"Now!" Tsunami ordered, clearly losing her patience.

Winter sighed, beginning to fly back toward the academy.

"Wait!" the small RainWing suddenly interjected. "Don't you have something to say to Moon first? Maybe about how she totally distracted that mean crocodile for you?"

He snorted, looking over his shoulder. Moon quickly averted her gaze, looking at her claws sheepishly.

"Thanks, I guess," he muttered. "Now try to keep up, NightWing; I don't have all day."

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"You're lucky that crocodile didn't cut very deep," the nurse, a stocky RainWing whose appearance didn't fit his profession said as he wrapped white bandages around Winter's wound. "Salties can easily kill a dragon; it's a good thing you were able to kill it."

Winter had already washed out the wound like the nurse had instructed, so as soon as the bandages were applied, he was sent on his way with instructions to clean it every few hours for the next couple of days. The nurse also sent him with a roll of fresh bandages, telling him to replace them daily. He was relieved once he was able to go; he simply wanted to go back to his cave and have some peace and quiet.

He was surprised to see Moonwatcher waiting out in the hallway

as he exited the nurse's office. Neither of them had spoken during the time it took to get him there, so he had anticipated that she had gone back to their cave, or somewhere else.

"You didn't have to stay, you know," he growled, setting off in the directions of their cave. He moved at a steady pace, even with a slight limp.

The NightWing quickly hurried to catch up with him. "Well, I wanted to make sure you didn't need any help."

Winter stopped, narrowing his arctic blue eyes at her in a glare. "I don't need *help*, especially not from a thieving, lying, conniving, snide NightWing like yourself. So let me be. Go open up a stupid scroll or something, since that's what you seem to do best."

He turned to leave, however stopped when Moon grabbed his arm, digging her claws in enough for him to feel slight pain. "What do you want?" he snarled.

"What I want, is for you to stop being such a jerk," she retorted. "We've known each other for, what, an hour, and you've been nothing but rude and narcissistic. You think you're all high and mighty, that you're better than everyone just because you're a prince, but if this is the way you treat dragons, then you're no better than anyone here." There was a fire in her jade eyes that he hadn't seen before, but it faded as she let go of him and started walking in the opposite direction of him.

Winter watched her leave for a moment, before continuing in his original path.

"And for the record," Moon called, "you're not as intimidating as you think you are."

He grumbled to himself, storming off in the direction of his cave. Or at least what he *thought* was the direction of his cave. He was too angry at the moment to really process where he was going.

Who does she think she is, talking to me like that? I'm an IceWing, I'm SUPPOSED to act like that, because all other tribes are inferior! I didn't

think she had a fiery side like that, though...she just seemed shy and introverted at first. Maybe I misjudged that NightWing. And it is a little cute when she gets all intense...

The ice blue dragon stopped and kicked the stone wall with his injured leg, the immediate pain a punishment for letting such a thought even cross his mind. If he'd been attacked by a saltwater crocodile, made an enemy in his winglet, and pissed off the quietest dragon he knew all in the first day of school, how much worse could things get?

Who am I kidding? It could always get worse.

Chapter 4: Twin Visions

Moon was already regretting what she'd just said to Winter. They weren't on friendly terms to begin with, and this would just make things worse. She said what she meant, though, and she meant what she said, so she wasn't going to go back and apologize. If she even wanted to, she couldn't; after she had angrily walked away from him, she'd gotten lost before she had even realized it.

Just keep walking...I'll get back to my cave eventually.

The thoughts of other dragons became closer after a few minutes, but they were unfamiliar, just like the rest of this place. Why did her mother make her go here? She just wanted to go back home, even if she had to clean their hut every day for a year. This school was full of strange dragons, and smells, and noises, and rude IceWings, and a SeaWing who was somehow able to block her mind reading seemingly without knowing it.

Moon's head throbbed as she approached the scene of an argument between three students, their loud words and even louder thoughts like a hammer to the skull. As she walked past them, they were too busy to even glance at her.

The pain didn't subside, even after she was many feet away from the fight. She decided to just keep wandering through the tunnels.

After a few more minutes, more thoughts gradually grew clearer in her head. These weren't angry, sharp ones though, which was a relief. The dragons producing them seemed very relaxed at the moment.

She quickly found where the thoughts were coming from. She saw what looked like the entrance to a cave on her right, but when she looked inside, it turned out to be a large cavern. A blue-green lake took up almost all of the floor space, and four SeaWings were swimming about in the turquoise water.

Maybe going for a swim would help clear my head. That sounds kind of nice right now, especially after what just happened during hunting. I'm not exactly the best swimmer, but I can stick to the edge of the water.

The NightWing walked over to the edge of the lake, where warm sunlight was pouring in through a hole in the cavern's roof. She thought that this would be a nice spot with the sun warming the water and prepared to lower herself into the lake, when a SeaWing slightly smaller than her popped up from beneath the surface.

"Sorry NightWing, but this is *my* spot," the female said in a tone not at all apologetic. "I got here first, and I picked here."

Moon was startled by her sudden appearance. "But, there's a lot more space over there," she said, pointing to a section of the lake farther back. "And since you've been here awhile, maybe you could...go over there?"

The pinkish-blue dragon glared at her. "I told you, this is *my* spot. None of the other spots have the warm water like this spot does. It's dark and cold in the rest of the lake."

"B-but..."

The SeaWing rolled her eyes, hoisting herself up onto the cavern floor and standing almost level with Moon. "How about *you* go to a different spot? I'm a *princess*, Princess Anemone to be exact. And I'm not about to leave my spot and let some NightWing have it. So either go somewhere dark and cold, like where you belong," she snarled, pointing to the shaded part of the lake, "or scram."

A second SeaWing, this one green, appeared where Anemone had been just moments before. "Princess, why don't you let her have your spot? You *have* been here the longest, and-"

"Shut *up,* Pike!" the small SeaWing growled. "Mind your own business." Turning back to Moon, she said "so what's it going to be? And don't try to trick me with some stupid lie about mind reading; everyone knows you NightWings are nothing but fakers."

"I...I'll just go..." Moonwatcher mumbled, walking back to the

entrance of the cavern.

"That's what I thought!" shouted the princess.

Are all royalty so snobbish? Moon thought as she sullenly left the cavern and continued walking through the many hallways of the academy. *Maybe I can find the library and talk to Starflight. He's usually pretty nice.*

It took several more minutes of walking, but she finally came across the library. It was nicer than she had expected. Fire globes still hung from the ceiling, although they were all soothing colors like blue, green, and purple. There were five windows on the wall to her right, each covered by leaves with green sunlight shining through. And there were about six rows of shelves, each looking to hold thirty or more scrolls. Starflight, the NightWing who had been blinded years ago by some sort of accident that he never explained, was sorting through piles of scrolls behind a large counter to the left.

"Hi, Starflight," Moon greeted softly as she walked up to the counter.

"Hello, Moon," he replied, seeming to have known she was there before she even reached the counter. "Have you finished the scrolls in your sleeping cave already?"

"No, but I'm almost done with one," she explained.

"That's not surprising. Anything I can do for you?" he asked, taking his attention off of the scrolls he was sorting through.

"Not really," she said. "It's just...well...my first day here isn't going so great."

"I can understand that," the blind librarian said. "You're in a new, unfamiliar place, surrounded by new, unfamiliar dragons, some of which aren't very welcoming. I expected that from a lot of students. It'll get better, trust me. I think you'll grow to like it here."

Thats doubtful, considering how shy she is. I almost feel bad for her, his mind said, betraying his words.

"I know, but it's not just that," Moon said. "There's these two dragons in my winglet, an IceWing and a SkyWing. The SkyWing kind of hates me for some reason, and so does the IceWing, but he's more complicated. One minute he's being rude and spiteful, and the next, he's standing up for me when the SkyWing was being particularly unfriendly. I...don't really know what to think about him yet. Everyone else is fine, though. But me and the IceWing got into an argument, even though I helped him kill a saltwater crocodile when we were hunting, and-"

Starflight held up a talon. "Hold on, slow down a minute. You killed a *saltwater crocodile*? I thought those were massive, there's no way you could have done that!"

"Well, I had to help the IceWing fight it. We both almost got killed. I tried to save him, then he had to save me, and now we're back to hating each other, and I just don't know what to do."

He bowed his head slightly, seemingly deep in thought. After several moments and a jumble of thoughts, he looked back up.

"Firstly, I'm glad you're not fish food," he said with a wry grin, "secondly, I think for right now, maybe try to apologize to the IceWing. It might put the two of you on better terms. And I wouldn't wait for him to apologize first; I'm not an expert on IceWings, but they're not the kind to say sorry very often."

It wasn't the answer she wanted to hear - but she didn't exactly know what she had hoped to hear - but it was worth a shot.

"Okay," she replied. "Also, do you know which way it is to the Jade Winglet caves from here? I'm kind of lost."

"Forgot your map, huh?" he asked. "I can fix that." He reached underneath the counter and pulled out a leather pouch. "You can carry it in here. Also, when you come to check out a scroll, I'll give you a library card to keep in here. You know what, I'll just give you one now. Stay there for a moment."

He walked farther down the counter to find it, letting his claws brush against it so he didn't go off-course. He moved pretty well for

a blind dragon. Then again, it had been years since his accident.

Starflight came back holding a pice of driftwood small enough to fit in his palm, carrying a scroll in his other talon. "How this works is that when you want to check out, I take your scroll and stamp it on this one. Each scroll has a unique stamp on one end, and when you bring it back, I stamp it again next to the first stamp. The library card is mainly for the aesthetic of having one."

He handed her the library card and the scroll. "And to get to your cave, you should be able to find it by going out the way you came and taking the second left."

"Okay," Moon said, placing the two items inside the pouch he gave her. "Thank you."

"Anytime," he replied, getting back to what he had been working on before she entered.

The NightWing followed his directions, and soon realized that she was nearing the Jade Winglet's caves.

I guess I should apologize to Winter. It's probably for the best, and Starflight gives good advice.

For whatever reason, her eyes flew up to a random quote board hanging from the ceiling. An ominous message was written on it, not optimistic or joyful like many of the others:

'Always expect the unexpected.'

Shortly after reading it, a sharp pain exploded inside her head and Moon fell to her knees, clutching her head as if trying to prevent it from splitting in half. This wasn't simply an overwhelming sensation of thoughts. Though she had only experienced this a few times, she knew what it was.

A vision.

Her mind suddenly emptied itself of everything but a blurry image. An image of an IceWing, Winter to be exact. Blood and sweat was running down his face, a deep gash just above his right

eye. His face was a contorted mix of despair, fury, and terror, and he appeared to be staring at someone or something else. The rest of the details were too fuzzy to make out, which was probably a good thing considering that just the main part of the vision was this horrible.

"Moon?" a faint voice called. At first she thought she was imagining things, but realized it was coming from the real world. It sounded like...Qibli.

As the vision faded and she regained her strength and sanity, she looked up and saw that it was in fact the SandWing she'd met just an hour ago.

"Are you alright?" the pale yellow dragon asked, reaching out a talon to help her up. "You look kind of sick."

The NightWing gratefully took his talon and he helped her get back to her feet. "Yeah, I'm fine. It's just a headache, that's all. I usually get them when I'm stressed," she lied.

He tilted his head. "A headache...okay. Must've been a pretty bad one. You're all sweaty and pale. Do you want me to take you to the nurse?"

That couldn't have just been a headache, his mind thought, rushing like a river with several other strings of thought. *She looked like she was trying to rip her skull open.*

He knows it wasn't a headache, she thought frantically. *Does he know about my powers? He can't possibly know...stay secret, stay hidden, stay safe, like Mom always says...*

"No, I think I'll be alright."

He stared at her for a moment. "Okay. I'll just walk with you back to your cave. You know, to make sure you don't collapse again."

She was startled when he wrapped a warm wing around her and began guiding her in the direction of their caves, but was too busy thinking about what she'd just seen to push him away or anything. Why was Winter in a vision? And why was she even *having* a

vision? In the past, most of them had been little things, like her mother leaving to go to the market at Possibility or something, small snippets of an event that happened soon after. This felt different though, like it was part of something much bigger.

They shortly arrived at the cave she and Winter shared. Moon said thanks to Qibli and reluctantly entered, where the IceWing she had planned on avoiding until a few minutes ago was sitting on his icy ledge.

He glanced suspiciously at her as she walked in, his striking blue eyes following her every move. But what was even more unsettling was that he didn't say a single word. He simply watched her for several moments, neither of them speaking to one another. Moon pretended to busy herself with finding her place in the scroll she was reading, but was focused much more on him. And he knew. Whenever she looked over at him to see if he was still watching, he glanced away.

Nearly twenty minutes of uncomfortable silence passed before she decided to speak. He clearly wasn't going to anytime soon, so she might as well apologize now.

However, before she got the chance, that familiar searing pain in her head was back, only impossibly stronger this time. It felt as if something was expanding inside her head, pushing against her skull, ready to burst at any moment. Her eyes squeezed shut, tears of pain immediately flowing from them as a second vision plagued her.

It was yet another IceWing, although it was much harder to discern them. She didn't even think she'd met them before, but they appeared about the same size as Winter was in the first vision, maybe slightly larger. Even if she did know them, it was near impossible to recognize their face. Not only because their shiny scales were streaked with mud and blades of grass, but they were wearing a mask that appeared to be made out of another dragon's skull. And if she wasn't mistaken, not just any dragon, but a NightWing. Their lips were parted in a snarl, gleaming white teeth exposed as they stared down whoever was unfortunate enough to be in their way. Could this have been who Winter was looking at in

the first vision? The lighting and angle was right for it. None of this explained why the pain was so much more immense this time, though. And then, that question was answered as her body seemed to take control, forcing her to quietly whisper a phrase.

"All is calm at Jade Mountain, or at least, so it seems,"

"Unbeknownst to most, being constructed is a devilish scheme."

"Then, dragons with scales as black as tar begin to vanish,"

"And soon, no one walks the rocky tunnels without a sense of panic."

"Two beings of ice, one lost but not forgotten,"

"The other an outcast, but clearly not as rotten."

"Both will fight till the very end,"

"However, only one will truly suffice."

"When ice and night collide, only with unity can they hope,"

"That they can put an end to this, the suffering that started with blue smoke."

Moon suddenly broke from whatever trance had befallen her, opening her tear-filled eyes to see a pair of arctic blue ones staring right back at her. Winter was holding her up, and she came to the conclusion that she had started to collapse again when that vision had started. His face was a mix of worry and fear, and there was a noticeable dark blue hue to it.

"I'm sorry," they both said at once, although they most likely had several different reasons for this. At any other time it would have been slightly comical, however with what had just happened, it was anything but.

"You go first," the two dragons said, again at the same time. This brought a small grin to Moon's face, and the same happened to Winter.

"I'm sorry for being such a jerk back at the nurse's office," the pale blue IceWing said as he stopped supporting her so she could sit back down on her leaf and moss bed. "And for...what happened just now."

Moon was confused for a moment, but soon realized that he must've meant how he had prevented her from falling.

"It's okay," she said. "Thanks for not letting me fall. And...I also wanted to apologize for saying what I did earlier. I was just in the heat of the moment and all, and my anger kind of got the better of me."

Winter gave a half-smile. "Don't apologize. I deserved to be told what you said, and I still do. I kind of admire that you called me out like that; no one's ever had the audacity to do that. But...um...what exactly was that? How you almost lost consciousness and then began rambling on like that."

Moons felt her expression fall. "You heard that?"

He nodded. "Every word."

She sighed. "To be honest...I don't really know. That's never happened to me before."

Winter nodded once more, although his thoughts were far less simple.

She's probably lying. Like mother and father always said, NightWings are no-good, lying, smoke-breathing lizards who don't deserve our respect. Well, technically Moon hatched in the rainforest, so she probably hasn't breathed smoke much, but still...and that stuff she said sounded awfully close to a prophecy. But what am I thinking?! Her tribe's so-called "powers" were proven to be false years ago. There are no mind-readers, there are no visions, and there certainly aren't any prophecies!

Winter suddenly got up and walked back over to his icy ledge, layed down and turned so he was facing the wall, just like earlier that morning.

Moonwatcher sighed. She curled up on her bed of leaves and attempted to immerse herself in a scroll, but for once in her life, couldn't manage to do so. She didn't want it to be true, but it was clear that she had just spoken a prophecy of some sort. It was a good thing there weren't any other classes today, because she was going to be thinking about it all day.

I hope you guys like the prophecy I made! I spent a good twenty minutes coming up with things that would rhyme and still get the point across. I changed the check-out system for scrolls if you couldn't tell, because it was kind of confusing in the stories where after someone returned a scroll, they stamped the library card over the first stamp. How would that even work with the card being made out of wood? It just makes more sense for them to stamp the scroll again once it was returned, at least to me. That's all for now, and I'll see you all next time. Cataclysm138, out!

❄Chapter 5: The Little Things❄

To be clear: I'm not planning on alternating the POV every chapter, but I want to try and have a decent amount of chapters in Moon's POV this time around. There will almost certainly still be more in Winter's, since it's easier for me to write from his perspective. Also, I added a window to their cave, cuz why not?

Winter woke up early the next morning, not quite sure when he'd fallen asleep the night before. All he remembered was that after the little incident involving what had sounded like - but surely wasn't - a prophecy, he had layed down on his ledge and eventually drifted off. It had to be around four in the morning, because the sky outside was still filled with stars and the cave was pitch black. His night vision had never been the best, and his moon globe wasn't in its usual spot on his ledge. He came to the realization that it must've rolled onto the floor overnight. There was a very dim glow on the floor next to his bed, and Winter knew it had to be it. His claws locked around the circular object and he brought it up to float above his left shoulder, rotating it to adjust the brightness. He was slightly alarmed when the pale light revealed Moonwatcher gazing out the window; her scales were so dark that he hadn't seen her until now.

The NightWing noticed the soft glow penetrating the darkness. "I didn't know you were awake," she said, rather than greeting him. Then again, he wasn't exactly expecting one after the events of the previous day. "Do you always wake up so early?"

Winter shrugged. "Back home, I just woke up whenever my parents came to tell me to get ready for training. Which was pretty much whenever they felt like it. Why are *you* up?"

"It's hard for me to fall asleep at night sometimes," she replied, turning her eyes back to the view outside. "I'm not sure if it has anything to do with me being a NightWing, but most dragons in my tribe aren't nocturnal, so I don't really know."

The thought of being nocturnal seemed like an alien subject to Winter. Although many IceWings stayed up late at night with the power of moon globes under their control, he had never been a night owl himself.

The pale blue dragon stood up, cracking his knuckles and flexing his wrists. "Well, maybe you should try and get some rest. I don't know about you, but I would never be able to function being tired all the time like you must be if you have a hard time sleeping at night." He began to walk toward the cave opening.

"Where are you going?" Moon abruptly asked. He turned around to see her sparkling eyes focused on him, the dark pupils dilated in the dim light.

"I'm just going to fly around outside for a bit. To loosen up my joints and try and wake up more, you know." He explained. "Alone," he added, in case she wanted to come with him.

"Are we allowed to leave the academy at night?" she questioned.

"I don't know, but I don't care if we aren't," he said, before he slipped out into the hallway.

Most of the fire globes were still lit, providing the same amount of light as they did during the daytime hours. He was the only dragon in the tunnels aside from the occasional wanderer, at least as far as he could tell. The only ways he knew that led outside were the front entrance and the hunting cave. In case he wasn't supposed to leave at night, he decided to try and find the hunting cave; that would be the less obvious choice.

Was it two rights, and then a left? Or two lefts and a right? Or a right, then a left, another right, then two more lefts?...

His mind was still foggy, and that didn't help him any. These tunnels were confusing enough without being half-asleep. He was so deep in thought that he nearly collided with a dark red SkyWing while turning a corner. His immediate thought was that it was Carnelian, but instead it was a larger, more muscular male. The dragon's snout was horribly disfigured, a portion of his lips seemingly melted away to reveal a set of yellowed, jagged teeth and part of his reddish gums.

"Watch where you're stepping, icehead," the SkyWing growled.

"You watch it," Winter mumbled as he continued down the hall, trying to keep his eyes off of the crimson dragon's horrid injury.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing," he quickly replied, not wanting to start an argument so early in the morning. He was already on unfriendly terms with Carnelian, and in a confusing position when it came to Moon. He didn't want to have to add someone else to the 'Keep your eye on them' list.

"That didn't sound like 'nothing' to me," the SkyWing said, but thankfully, he didn't push it any further.

Winter noticed a MudWing up ahead, wondering what they could possibly be wanting. When he came within several feet of them, they approached him.

"You'd better watch your tongue around Flame," they said, but it was more of an advisory than a threat. "He means business. He nearly started a brawl with a SeaWing yesterday morning."

"I think I'll be fine," Winter said, walking around them.

After a few minutes, he came across the school library, a place that he was in no hurry to visit at the moment. Whoever the librarian was, they were most likely asleep anyway. As he continued to stroll through the rocky tunnels of the academy, he

had no luck finding the hunting cave. However, he found a third exit he hadn't known about until now.

It was in a large cavern with some sort of underground lake covering most of the space. At first he thought about going for a swim instead, but then he noticed a few SeaWings dozing underwater and decided against it. The way out was a hole in the roof of the cavern, appearing to be just large enough for him to fit through.

"What are you doing?"

Winter startled at the sound of his sister's voice from behind him, whirling around to see a smirk plastered on her face.

"Just going for a flight outside. To clear my head. Why?"

She shrugged. "Just wondering. I was going to do the same thing, so I'll come with you."

He rolled his eyes. "I'd prefer to be alone, thanks."

"I don't particularly care about that," she replied in a sharp tone. "After you," she said, guesturing with a wing to the hole in the ceiling.

Grumbling to himself, Winter flapped his icy wings and shot upward, clearing the gap by just an inch or two. He was on the more muscular side for a male of his age, but sometimes that could be a problem, especially when it came to fitting through small spaces. No sooner had he appeared in the cool night air outside than his sister had done the same. She quickly set off in a seemingly random direction, and, not having an idea of anywhere else to go, Winter followed her.

"So," Icicle said when he caught up with her, "how was your first day? Mine wasn't as bad as I expected, but it was bad enough. There's this one SeaWing in my winglet that will not. Stop. Talking. One word can't pass someone's lips without him adding onto it. At least the RainWing is pretty quiet. Don't get me started on the NightWing, though. I think his name is Bigtail, but he is just

so...so...ill-mannered! He doesn't pick up after himself, he chews with his mouth open, and worst of all, he called me a snide, privileged brat yesterday afternoon! If he had *any* idea of what we go through back home, then-"

"Well, did you say something to provoke him?"

Icicle's expression became one of slight guilt. "No, not really...actually, I guess. I *may* have said I didn't need his or anyone else's help when he tried to assist me with lifting up this immense crocodile carcass. Seriously though, that thing was bigger than some of the dragons here. Anyway, I was trying to tear a piece off of it for lunch, unsuccessfully, and he tried to help, and...yeah."

Winter was a little angry that she had tried to eat part of the saltwater crocodile he had killed, but realized that it must've been far too big for his winglet alone to eat. Tsunami must've put it in the community pile for that reason.

"For your information, *I* killed that *saltwater* crocodile. Not just any crocodile, a saltwater crocodile."

"What's the difference?"

"Hello? They're much bigger than any other crocodile species on the continent, and they live in the ocean. That's the difference. The thing nearly killed me during hunting yesterday. I would be sleeping with the fishes if it wasn't for...never mind."

"It wasn't for *what*, Winter?" Icicle hissed, her tone taking a surprisingly sharp edge. She had stopped flying, and was now staring directly into his eyes, expectantly waiting for an answer.

He quietly mumbled the answer.

"What?"

"The NightWing in my winglet had to help," he said, looking down. "She distracted it for me, and then *she* got pinned by the crocodile, and I don't know why, but I couldn't let her be killed. I was able to gouge it in the eye, and then I killed it with my frostbreath when it tried to get away."

Icicle gazed at him with a look of disgust, shaking her head. "I can't beleive you. It was bad enough that you had to be rescued by one of those vile lizards, but then you saved them? You should've let them die, Winter! Watched as their blood seeped out into the water as any *normal* IceWing would. And the worst part is that it was a girl. First day of school and you've already disobeyed our parent's orders. Well done, Winter."

She whirled around and flew away from him, and this time, he didn't bother following her.

The sun still hadn't begun to rise yet. He guessed that it was around four thirty now. Instead of flying around like he had originally planned, he soared around the mountain until he found a secluded area littered with trees. Right now, he needed to just relax, away from everyone else. Especially his sister, but even more so from Moon.

Winter landed in a small clearing within the forest, a spot where he could still see the sky as he lay flat on his back. The chilly morning air reminded him of home, a place he would far rather be at the moment. In the Ice Kingdom, there was always order. Here, he'd made an enemy out of Carnelian and possibly Flame, angered his sister, and was having some very confusing feelings about a certain NightWing. One minute they hated each other, the next they were saving each other from crocodiles, and then they were back to despising one another. It always seemed like she was listening to something as well, even if nobody was speaking.

As Winter gazed up at the millions of twinkling stars above him, the wet grass slick against his scales, all he could think of was her. And he hated himself for that.

Classes don't start until seven. I might as well get some rest.

And with that final thought, he closed his eyes and let the calming darkness consume him.

Winter woke up for the second time that morning, feeling three

slight but distinct vibrations in the ground underneath him. He sat up abruptly, at first thinking it was an earthquake. But then he realized that it was actually the three gongs, signaling the start of classes for the day. He looked up to the sky and saw the glowing ball of fire over the horizon beginning its ascent.

I can't be late again! was his immediate thought. *I have science first, if I remember correctly. I think it's Clay who teaches that.*

The pale blue IceWing shot up into the sky, finding the closest way into the academy, which turned out to be the front entrance, and trying to picture the map of the school in his head.

After darting down random hallways to no avail, he heard two gongs. He had to hurry up.

More confusing tunnels and empty caves. One final gong.

He thought for sure he would be tardy again. That is, until he heard voices from a nearby cave. He looked inside, and sure enough, saw the rest of his winglet there. The good news was that he'd made it on time. The bad news was that the Gold winglet was also there. His sister's winglet.

There were fourteen desks, two rows of seven in the middle of the cave. The rest of the space was taken up by counters, sinks, cabinets, the teacher's desk, a chalkboard on the wall behind it, and a large table in the back of the room. Winter was the last to arrive, and the only desk available was in the back row, next to the one dragon he wanted to see the lest right now. Not Moonwatcher, nor Kinkajou, the class chatterbox, or Qibli, the geek who thought he was funny but really wasn't. Instead, it was Icicle.

Winter quickly walked over to the empty seat and sat down. His sister gave him nothing more than a glance and a bitter glare. Which was for the best. Whatever she had to say to him, it definitely wasn't pleasant.

"Good morning, everyone!" Clay greeted them from the front of the room. "I see you were nearly late, Winter. Tsunami told me you were tardy for hunting class yesterday as well. I suggest you try and

memorize a map of the school in your near future. Anyway, how is everyone doing this morning?"

Winter felt his face heat up at the sudden attention brought upon him.

Most of the class groaned "Tired" in response to the large MudWing. All except Kinkajou, who was as perky as ever.

"I'm SUPER excited!" she beamed from a few seats over. "I can't wait to do experiments and stuff!"

Clay smiled at her enthusiasm. "I'm glad to hear it. Especially since we'll be performing a small experiment today! Don't worry, it's not graded, it's just for fun. Now, I would do some kind of get-to-know-you activity, but I know that Tsunami is already doing that for hunting, so even if some winglets haven't done that yet, you will soon enough. For this experiment, we're simply going to be combining different chemicals and seeing how they react. None of them are dangerous, but wear safety goggles just in case. Some of them could get a little...messy, if you use an improper amount of chemical. I'm going to partner you all up for this, okay? And after that, we'll go over safety procedures and everything. Winter, why don't I start with you? You'll be paired with...hm, lets see here..."

I really hope I don't get paired with Qibli or Kinkajou. Then again, either of them would be better than Carnelian, at least at the moment. At least they don't hate me. The only thing worse than being with that hotheaded SkyWing would be getting partnered with-

"Moonwatcher! You two will be a pair."

Figures.

Winter glanced at where the NightWing was sitting, in the front row and four seats diagonal to the right. She stared back with an equally surprised gaze. For whatever reason, he felt the urge to look over at Qibli, who was sitting three seats away from Moon. Strangely, the pale yellow SandWing looked a little angry, or even jealous. Did he...*want* to be paired with Moon?

Winter contemplated this while Clay gave the rest of the students partners. After he showed everyone where the fire extinguisher was and how to properly rinse out your eye if a foreign substance or chemical got in them, he let them loose and they all set to work. Reluctantly, at least in Winter's case.

He hadn't been paying as much attention as he should've during the instructions, but he still knew where to find the beakers that they would need to combine different substances. He and Moon met at an empty counter, both of them wearing safety goggles, and he set them down

"Hey," she said, quieter than normal. "How'd your flying go?"

Winter shrugged. "I ran into my sister. She wasn't too happy with me." He looked over to where she and a SeaWing were working together at a separate counter. She caught his gaze for a moment, but quickly bared her teeth and broke it.

"Why not?" Moon asked.

"Doesn't matter," he replied. "Let's just get this over with." He took two of the substances the NightWing had gathered; a powdery, black substance and a clear liquid that looked similar to water. It seemed too thick for that to be the case, though.

"I don't know if we're supposed to mix those two..." the NightWing said worriedly.

"Clay said we're looking at the reactions of chemicals," he replied. "And if we mix them, we might get one. So stop second-guessing me." He poured the black substance in first, then the clear liquid.

"Okay, genius," she retorted. "If you're so smart, then why isn't anything happening?"

He looked into the beaker. The substances had mixed, but like she said, no reaction had taken place.

"We probably just need more." He noticed another test tube with the clear liquid inside sitting at a nearby counter that nobody was working at. He took it and was going to add it to the mixture, but

Moon grabbed it from his grip before he could.

"We can't do that!" she said in exasperation. "We're never supposed to use more than the amount we're given. Weren't you paying any atten- Winter!" the smaller dragon cried as he poured a second tube of the powdery material into the concoction.

It ended with the same result as the first. Nothing.

"See?" he said. "Nothing happened. Again. You worry too mu-"

He wasn't able to finish the sentence before there was a soft *poof!* from the beaker. Before he knew what had happened, his entire upper body was coated in ash. Looking to his right, he saw that the same thing had happened to Moon.

"Sorry," he muttered, expecting her to yell at him or something like that. However, her reaction was completely unexpected.

She laughed.

The NightWing was laughing so hard that he couldn't even hear it at first, but it quickly became obvious when she had to lean against the counter for support and when she lifted her safety goggles to wipe the tears from her eyes.

Believe it or not, Winter grinned. Not a spiteful one, or a smug one, but a genuine smile. And then, he began laughing as well.

Once all the other students saw the scene, they started to hoot with laughter too. Even Clay chuckled when he saw that they hadn't gotten hurt or anything.

But none of them laughed as much as Winter and Moon did.

❄Chapter 6❄

"Sorry," Winter apologized again to Moon as they walked through the halls of the academy, the upper halves of their bodies still coated in ash. "How was I supposed to know it would do that?"

"There was a list of instructions that told what should've happened with each mixture," she replied. "And it also happened to list the *exact amount* of each substance we needed. Maybe we wouldn't be here right now if *someone* had looked at it."

He cracked a small smile. "Well, at least it gives us an excuse to get out of class for a bit. You're welcome, by the way."

"For covering us both in strong-smelling ash?"

"Yep. And pungent would be a better word." He coughed once, a small cloud of the dusty substance exiting his throat.

Moon giggled. "I know you *think* using big, fancy words makes you seem sophisticated, but it kind of makes you seem more narcissistic than anything. Also, you're an idiot," she said, a playful tone in her voice. "Let's just go clean off and get back to class before we get in trouble."

"That, I can agree on."

They hurried down to the underground lake, and they were alone since all of the regular visitors were stuck in class.

Winter was the first to enter the water, quietly slipping in so not to be heard by any passerby. The lake was freezing in the early morning, the chilly air entering through the hole in the roof. It didn't bother him though, having grown up in the coldest place in Pyrrhia. It was a different story for Moon.

He watched with mild amusement as the NightWing hesitantly dipped her tail in the water, only to immediately retract it.

"To cold for you, there?" he asked in a slightly mocking tone. "I could stay in here all day if I wanted to. I'm built for temperatures way colder than this."

"Yeah, yeah..." she muttered. "If you're looking to brag about how great you IceWings claim to be, do it somewhere else. I'm not in the mood for it." She crouched down at the edge of the lake and thrust half her arm underwater, only to bring it back up with a yelp. "On second thought, maybe I'll just stay like this all day."

Winter rolled his eyes. "Suit yourself," he said, before diving under. The clumpy gray ash quickly washed off of his pristine icy scales, no longer tainting him with its foul aroma and dull color. He scrubbed himself clean of any small particles left, and reappeared at the surface once he was satisfied. Meanwhile, Moonwatcher was *still* standing at the edge of the lake. He knew there was only one way to get her in the water.

The pale blue IceWing swam over to the edge, resting his arms on the rock. "Having fun smelling like a burnt seal carcass up there?"

She raised an eyebrow at him. "I don't know what that smells like."

"Well, it's not pleasant, that's for sure. Hey, what's that pouch you're wearing?" he asked, noticing a scroll-sized leather pouch slung across her torso.

"Starflight gave it to me to keep my library stuff in. I also have the map of the school and our schedule in here."

"Can I see it?"

She looked uneasy for a moment, as if he might try to strangle her with it or something. "Sure..." she said, taking it off to hand to him.

Winter reached for it, and just as he was about to grab it, he latched his claws onto her wrist firmly enough to yank her forward. There was a brief moment of panic in her eyes, but it didn't last long, as she fell into the ice-cold water just as he had planned. She let out a shrill scream, but it was cut off as her head went under for a second.

Moon's head quickly popped up to the surface, one of the fiercest glares he'd ever been given on her face. She looked like she wanted to tear his heart out of his chest, and for a split second he worried that she might do just that.

"Are you crazy?!" she shrieked. "Why would you do that? I could've gotten a concussion! Or I could've broken an arm, or a leg, or fractured a rib! Do you know how much..."

His brain tuned her words out after a few moments, instead focusing on how assertive and unruly she became when she got this angry. In a way, it reminded him of himself.

"Are you listening to a word I'm saying?" Moon asked, grabbing him by the shoulders and shaking him violently. "Don't you dare do that again! Ever!"

Rather than speaking, Winter burst out in uncontrollable laughter, floating on his back as he was unable to swim. Moon splashed him in the face with cold water, but he didn't stop. Not until she forced him underwater for a few seconds, and then he *had* to stop laughing. He came up to the surface sputtering and coughing up water, but he still had a large grin on his face.

"That's what you get for scaring me like that!" Moon said with a sound mixed between a snort and a growl.

"It was-"He paused to cough. "It was the only...the only way to get you in the lake."

The frown disappeared from her face. "I guess that's true. It's still really cold, though."

"I can fix that," Winter said, swimming closer to her.

The NightWing hurriedly backed away. "Nope! I'm good, I'm fine, thank you! I'll stay over here at the edge, where it's nice and safe."

"What do you mean, safe?" he asked, genuinely curious. "You do know how to swim, right?"

She sheepishly glanced away. "No..."

He almost laughed, but thought better of it.

I could probably teach her how to. Not today, but maybe some other time. How can someone not know how to swim? I thought it just came naturally.

He saw a strange look on her face, somewhere between embarrassment and hurt. Had he done something wrong?

Winter swam over to her, and this time she didn't try to avoid him. "I'm sorry," he said for the third time in less than half an hour. "I didn't realize you can't swim."

She gazed at him with those remarkable green eyes of hers. "It's okay. Maybe...you could teach me how, sometime?"

What do I say? If I say yes...what am I saying? That shouldn't even be an option for an IceWing, especially not a royal one. I don't help NightWings, not even her!

The expression on her face fell, and for a second he thought that just possibly...she had read his mind. But then the logical part of his brain kicked in and reminded him that that isn't possible.

But if I say no, she'll be disappointed...

"Sure," he blurted before he could stop himself.

STUPID.

He couldn't tell for sure, but he thought he saw a hint of a smile on her face after his response.

"Alright. Could you try and find that leather pouch?" she asked. "I dropped it when you *rudely* pulled me into the water."

Winter nodded, submerging into the blue water once again. He knew it would be lower in the lake, if not at the bottom, since it had items inside. Hopefully it wasn't all the way at the floor of the lake, but if it was, he knew he would be able to hold his breath long enough. He wasn't a MudWing, but he could at least go without air underwater for a few minutes longer than the average dragon.

He swam further and further down, wondering just how deep this lake was. Looking up, he could only see faint traces of light from the surface. It was getting more difficult to see by the second. But finally, he saw a silver glint a few feet ahead of him.

Winter approached it, and could barely make out the silhouette of some sort of parcel, the strap caught on a sharp outcrop of rock. Convenient. Almost too much so.

He grabbed the pouch, silently hoping nothing inside had gotten ruined. Moon was already angry enough; he wouldn't want to get on her nerves any more.

Not that I want her to like me or be my friend, because I DON'T. I just want to make as few enemies as possible while I'm at this dumpy academy.

The IceWing began to swim back up to the surface, his lungs starting to burn as he carried the pouch with him. In the corner of his eye, he saw a flash of movement, and a slight, but noticeable electric ZAP crackled several feet away.

Oh hell no, he thought. *That better not be what I think it is...*

He suddenly felt a sharp, buzzing pain, not like anything he'd felt before. The only thing he could compare it to was static electricity, but this was about ten times worse. Caught off guard, he accidentally inhaled water, his nose burning immediately.

He swam faster, reaching the surface far faster than it had taken him to swim down and retrieve the parcel. Moon was standing at the edge of the lake once again, dripping wet. She seemed relieved when he broke the surface, but he didn't have the time to analyze her expression fully. He threw the leather pouch onto the rock, scrambling up there as quick as he could. Winter coughed up a little water, but not much, as it had entered through his nose and not his mouth.

"You okay?" Moon asked, looking at him weirdly. "Why were you in such a hurry just now?"

"There's an electric eel in there," he replied.

She now looked more annoyed than worried. "Okay, you can stop with all your little jokes now. It was kind of funny when you caused the incident in science, and when you pulled me into the lake, but I'm just getting frustrated now. Quit making excuses, Winter. Let's just get back to class."

"I'm serious!" he insisted. "It shocked me. It was like static electricity, but worse. And it was all over my body too, so it had to be something in the water."

Something in his voice must've gotten her attention. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Feel it for yourself if you don't believe me. Actually, that's not a good idea," Winter said on second thought. "I think I'll tell Clay when we get back to class, though."

Moon just nodded, leaving the cavern. He followed her. Winter felt an abnormal warm draft of air as he left, but thought nothing of it.

They didn't talk at all on the way back.

The rest of the morning was for the most part, uneventful. The Jade Winglet sat through history class, where Webs droned on for an hour about something along the lines of the Summer Palace being destroyed. He assigned homework on the first day of class, which was disappointing to everyone. The final class they had before lunch break was math, a subject Winter wasn't the greatest in.

Now, four of the five dragons in their winglet sat together in the prey center, Carnelian being the only one to sit by herself. Winter already hated this place. It was basically a first-come-first-serve basis, and by the time they got there, everything was pretty picked over. Luckily, there was still a good amount of the saltwater crocodile he'd killed yesterday. The only part that was gone was the head, which was a little disturbing.

Their group sat in a corner away from everyone else. Qibli was already ravenously chowing down on his portion of the large reptile, while Winter and Moon remained hesitant. Kinkajou, of course, refused to eat meat, instead selecting various fruits. He was baffled that someone could willingly eat nothing but plants their whole life.

"Look," the SandWing said between bites. "You guys really should-" he swallowed a mouthful of crocodile meat. "Try it. If you don't like it, more for me. Just take a bite, don't be shy!" He then tore another chunk off of his helping and began chewing obnoxiously once again. For whatever reason, Moon seemed to find his actions amusing.

"Only if you learn some table manners," Winter said with disgust.

"Manners? What manners?" Qibli asked, seeming to be genuinely confused. "You know, where I grew up-" he gulped down the meat he'd been chewing. "You take what you can get and eat it as fast as possible. That way, nobody else can have it or steal it from you."

"Where *did* you grow up, before you started working with Queen Thorn?" Moon asked.

"Scorpion Den," was his reply. "Full of outclaws. Not exactly an ideal place to live, but I got by. Probably why I'm so smart. Had to outwit the competition."

Moon laughed.

Winter shook his head, finally taking a bite of crocodile. It was very chewy, and sort of tasted like chicken. It was alright, but eating seafood his whole life up until now had made him a bit of a snob when it came to other types of food.

"You can have the rest," he said, sliding the remaining meat over to Qibli. The SandWing had just finished his portion, so he was more than happy for seconds.

"Thanks Winter!" he said, shoveling it into his mouth. "You rock!" Small bits of crocodile flew out of his mouth and landed just an

inch away from him.

"You're a pig," Winter retorted.

Moon tried hers, and gave it to Qibli as well.

"What is wrong with your tastebuds?" the pale yellow dragon asked.

She shrugged. "I guess we just grew up eating different food than you."

"Well, there's only one thing I can say to that," Qibli said. He suddenly belched loudly. "Two things. And the second one is, bon apétit!"

He proceeded to wolf down the rest of the crocodile meat, while Winter and Moon each sought out something more attuned to their tastes.

After lunch, there were only two classes left on his schedule. Technically, his and Moon's, since they both had the same classes and at the same times. The first was art, and the second was biology. Sunny taught art, but all they really did today was go over what they would be doing in class and labeling little cubbies where they would keep their projects. Clay taught biology, and instead of learning about the bodies of dragons, they learned about the bodies of cows. Mostly the brain, which wasn't even very large. During the lesson, the MudWing repeatedly mentioned how hungry he was for cow, which was not at all surprising.

The true surprise of the day came later that afternoon.

Winter and Moonwatcher were walking back to their cave from biology, making feeble attempts at small talk. Everything seemed pretty normal. The halls were bustling with dragons heading back to their own sleeping caves, chatting amongst themselves. The occasional insult was thrown their way, particularly IceWings making snide comments about Moon. Winter felt like saying something, but it was the end of the day, and he just wanted to finish his homework. He didn't see any point in starting trouble.

Somewhere along the way, Qibli caught up with them.

"Hey guys!" he greeted them, hustling along at a brisk pace. "Winter, can you help me with a math problem? I didn't finish the worksheet in class, and I don't understand the last question."

The IceWing sighed. He knew if he said no, Qibli would just keep bothering him until he agreed, so he decided it would be better just to get it over with.

"I'm not sure I'll be much help, but I'll see what I can do."

Instead of going to his cave, he went over two to the one Qibli shared with Carnelian. Winter was glad to see that the SkyWing wasn't present at the moment.

"Alright, where's the workshe-"

He was taken by surprise when Qibli shoved him forcefully against the wall of the cave.

"What are you doing?!" he hissed. "Let go!"

The SandWing held tight. "Listen, Winter," he snarled in a voice that sounded far from his own. "You better back off of Moon. She's mine. Nobody else can have her."

"What are you talking about?" Winter responded, trying to free himself from Qibli's grasp.

"I saw you two at the underground lake this morning. You think you're so clever, causing a mishap in science so you could get an excuse to spend more time with her. Smart, I'll admit, but cowardly."

The IceWing blushed furiously. "You think I *tried* to cause that? That was an accident! She's not even my friend, and she never will be. But if you think you're going to *threaten* me...then you've got another thing coming."

He wrapped his spiked tail around Qibli's leg and pulled, causing his knee to buckle. He fell flat on his back, and Winter was able to

get himself out of the position he'd been in just moments before.

"Trust me, you sun-loving lizard," he spat. "You do not want to get on my bad side."

He stormed out of Qibli's cave, fuming as he walked over to his own. He expected to see Moonwatcher sitting on her leaf bed reading or working on homework. However, she was gone.

●Chapter 7: Confusion & Mistrust●

[image]

After hearing the argument between Winter and Qibli in the SandWing's sleeping cave, Moon had decided it would be best to leave them both be for now. It was probably better for all three of them. The two males were most likely silently fuming to themselves, and she was stuck in a whirlwind of emotions that she saw no way out of. So really, right now the best thing to do seemed to be to give them space. She probably needed it more than they did, anyway.

Moon now sat in a vacant sleeping cave, knowing that nobody inhabited it at the moment. She had her history homework with her, hoping it would keep her mind off of the things she had just heard.

So it was the SkyWings who destroyed the Summer Palace. At least I think that's what Webs said. But...wasn't it a MudWing who betrayed him and followed him there? Or was it the SkyWings AND the MudWings?

She sighed, setting her homework down and burying her head in her arms like an upset dragonet. Which, now that she thought about it, wasn't too far from the truth. She wasn't sure who to trust between the icy dragon who was her clawmate, or the charming SandWing known as Qibli.

It was only the second day of school, and she was already getting wrapped up in drama and confusion. Moon longed to be home in the rainforest, where things were much simpler. Sure, nearly everyone in her tribe hated her there, but at least she could be away from all of this craziness.

I thought Qibli was a nice guy...maybe he is, but right now it sure

doesn't seem like it. How can he say I'm his, that he likes me in...that way, when we've barely known each other for two days? I don't like him like that! Especially not now that I've seen his dark side. But Winter isn't much better, is he? He's always treating dragons as lesser individuals, and it seems like he only cares about himself. But at least he's not obsessive of me like Qibli seems to be. And he did *try to talk his way out of the fight before resorting to violence...but then again, he said we aren't friends, and we never will be. Maybe I don't WANT to be friends with him now...did I ever want to, though? I don't know who I should like more at this point. Both of them have pros and cons to them, but that's pretty much the same for everyone.*

Rather than tormenting herself by continuing to ponder this subject, Moon simply wrote down what she thought the answers were to the homework, too tired to try and remember it all. Then, she fell asleep early in this cave, the dark shadows enveloping her as night grew closer. She didn't want to go back to her sleeping cave just yet. It seemed that for now, the only dragon she could truly trust, was herself.

Moon woke up the next morning, noticing that it was still relatively dark. It didn't seem super early, but clearly classes hadn't started yet. She felt rested and refreshed; she'd actually gotten a good night's sleep for once. A surprise, considering what she had heard the previous day.

Knowing that there was still time to kill, the NightWing got up to go explore more of the academy, only to feel a sharp pop in her spine.

She cried out in pain as the horrible feeling continued at a dull throb. She must've slept wrong last night.

Moon went through with her plan, although she had to move a little slower to ease the pain. She didn't have her map with her, having left the leather pouch in her sleeping cave by accident. At least it would test how well she could navigate without it.

She was able to figure out where she was for longer than she thought she would, so that was a sign of improvement. After awhile though, she ended up at the Great Hall when she thought she had been heading to the library. She must've taken a wrong turn somewhere. Moon didn't stick around for long, but smiled a little when she saw Clay drowsing next to the large gong, the mallet sitting loosely in his claws.

Moon remembered that the underground lake was close to the library, and she knew how to get there from here. So, she walked along, passing only a few wandering souls before coming across the large body of water. She had heard panicked thoughts long before she got there, although couldn't tell from whom they originated. It wasn't long until she could hear shouts coming from inside the cavern, and then she knew who it was.

"Sunny, hold the net still!" Tsunami barked. "This thing is slippery, and we have to get it out of here before the school day starts!"

There was a soft splash, followed by a loud curse from the SeaWing princess.

"Sorry!" the small SandWing apologized. "I'll get it!"

"You better! I can't hold onto this thing for much longer!"

Moon took a peek inside, and saw her wrestling with a large, wormlike creature. It was several feet long and dark gray, looking similar to some kind of catfish.

That must be what Winter was talking about. I guess there really was an electric eel in there.

"Okay, I got it!" Sunny said, scrambling back up onto the rocks with a fishing net in her talons.

The NightWing walked off, wanting to get to the library soon.

She arrived there within a few minutes, and was disappointed to see that Starflight wasn't working the counter. Instead it was Fatespeaker; the blind librarian must've been asleep still. The dark purple dragon currently there was drowsing as well, a pool of saliva

next to her mouth. Clearly she wasn't taking her role very seriously.

Moon ventured over to the shelves of scrolls, looking through the genres she enjoyed best: sci-fi, nonfiction, mystery, biographies. She liked all of them, but none were as fascinating as fantasy. She loved that genre in particular; there were no rules to fantasy, which could make for some pretty interesting stories. She had once read a scroll about talking scavengers. And not the tiny creatures speaking in their own language of gibberish, but actually using words she could understand! It was so strange, yet made perfect sense at the same time.

Unfortunately, she wasn't able to find anything that sparked her interest before she heard the now-familiar sound of the gong echoing through the academy. Class was starting soon.

Moonwatcher wished her winglet could hunt today, but they only went on Mondays and Fridays. At least they were able to go twice per week, but it still seemed so far away. Reluctantly, she abandoned the shelf of scrolls she was examining and headed to science class.

She was able to make her way there fairly quickly, considering she didn't have her map with her. Winter was actually one of the first to arrive, but she saw it resting underneath his chair when she got their. He must've taken it from her pouch while she was gone. Technically it wasn't *hers,* per say, and at least he wasn't late this time. She was glad she didn't sit next to him currently, not after what she had overheard earlier. She felt the same toward Qibli right now.

I wonder if he really meant what he said to Qibli, she thought as she took her seat. *I should've looked at his thoughts to check...but do I really want to be purposely sifting through dragons' minds like that? It's one thing to not be able to control it, but it's another thing entirely to abuse my powers in that way.*

Sooner or later, everyone trickled into the classroom. Clay was late, simply because he had been ringing the gong. Everyone else was on time, including Pike, the SeaWing who sat next to her on the left. Nobody sat to her right, which was the main reason she'd

chosen this desk.

"Settle down, everyone," Clay urged as he limped into the room. "I know you're all excited, and it's only the third day of school, but we still have work to get done."

Once everyone had quieted, he continued speaking.

"Now, yesterday when I gave you all partners to work with, I was just testing out who works best together," he explained. "That little experiment was really just to keep you busy. Today, I'm going to assign your partners for the rest of the school year. If we ever do projects with more than two students per group, we'll figure that out as we get there. But for now, here is the list of partners..."

Moon was unsure whether she wanted to be partnered with Winter or Qibli, or someone else. It would probably be better than being with some stranger or Carnelian, or someone else who didn't get along with her, but at the same time, there was a lot going on between the three of them, and she didn't want this to fan the flames. If she did have to get partnered with one of them, she silently prayed it would be Winter, even if he was a jerk sometimes. They got along well for the most part, and it was pretty fun when he wasn't so uptight, like the day before.

"...Icicle and Bigtail. Flame and Tamarin..." Clay listed.

Moon looked over at all four dragons, seated in different areas of the room. She recognized Icicle as the female IceWing who had accompanied Winter when they had gotten to the academy on the first day. Flame was unfamiliar, but an injury to his snout sure made his face pretty unforgettable, and not in a good way. Neither of them looked pleased with their partners. Tamarin, a blind RainWing, looked uneasy, while the only other NightWing in the room, Bigtail, seemed kind of happy.

"Qibli and Turtle. Carnelian and Kinkajou..."

Moon heard irritated sighs from two of the four dragons, although she wasn't sure which.

"Wait, I read that wrong," Clay admitted. "Qibli and Carnelian, Turtle and Kinkajou."

Yes! was the excited response from Kinkajou's mind. Not surprisingly, Turtle was a little nervous, and both Qibli and Carnelian weren't looking forward to being partners.

I can't believe I got partnered with him...

This is not going to be good. I wish I would've been partners with Moon! And she and Winter are the only two left...

"And finally, Winter and Moonwatcher," the MudWing finished. He set down the sheet of paper he'd been holding, and walked over to the chalkboard. "Now that we have that all figured out, today we're going to learn about cells and the different parts that make them function. In this class, we only learn about the basic cells, though. Of course, there are special ones that are responsible for...other things...but that's a different subject that we don't cover here."

Someone snickered in the back of the classroom. Either Clay didn't hear them, or he disregarded it, because he continued with class.

"I like to think of cells as tiny little cities," he said, beginning to draw a sloppy diagram on the chalkboard. "The nucleus is like a town hall or something, mitochondria are like the sun, I guess, if sunlight powered cities somehow..." There was a repetitive tapping as he continued drawing. "The cell membrane keeps things in and out, like a wall, and cytoplasm holds everything together, like the queen of a tribe. Then there's the Endoplasmic Reticulum - I know, it's a mouthful - and it's like the letter deliverer. It delivers materials and nutrients to the rest of the cell. The vacuoles are storage, ribosomes produce protein, and the Golgi apparatus temporarily stores that protein." Once he was finished, he had a diagram of a cell completely drawn on the chalkboard. It wasn't very detailed, but it was legible for the most part.

Qibli raised his arm.

"Yes, Qibli?"

The SandWing lowered his arm. "You do know there are many more parts of cells, right?"

"Yes, I do know that. We're just covering the most important parts. Unless you'd like me to go over the rest?"

"No!" most of the class responded.

Clay smiled. "That's what I thought. Now that I've gone over all of this, I'm going to hand out a worksheet to all of you. It covers what you've just learned, but I'll leave the example up on the board in case you need it. Once you and your partner are done, check each other's work, and then the rest of class is yours."

As the MudWing was handing out the homework, Moon realized that for once, there hadn't been a flare of negative thoughts from Winter when it was announced they were partners. Maybe they were making progress.

The worksheet was a double-pager, but all she had to do was label the parts of a cell and fill in what each one did. She didn't even need to resort to using the diagram on the chalkboard.

Winter finished just a couple minutes after her, and they met at one of the back counters to compare answers, so not to reveal any of them to other students.

After examining his paper, she passed it back to him. "You got the Endoplasmic Reticulum and Golgi Apparatus mixed up, but that's it."

The IceWing grumbled something nearly inaudible to her under his breath. Not quite, though. She was almost certain that he'd said *thank you*.

After quickly correcting his errors, he slid her paper back. "Yours is perfect."

The two parted and went back to their seats. Moon suddenly realized she had nothing left to do, and there was still thirty-five minutes left in class. She knew the scroll she'd been reading was at their cave in her leather pouch.

The NightWing shyly walked up to Clay's desk, where he was busy writing something down. He looked up at her with amber eyes as she approached.

"Need anything?" he asked, keeping his attention partly on what he was writing.

"Um...could I go get something from my cave?" she asked softly. "I-I think I left a scroll there."

Clay smiled. Whether it was out of pity for her obvious lack of social skills, or for something else, she was unsure of. "Of course! There's a hall pass by the door; make sure you take it."

She muttered a quiet thank you, hurriedly taking the hall pass and slipping out into the deserted corridor.

The halls were empty as Moon walked to her cave, the glow of the fire globes suddenly eerie and making her feel uneasy.

She knew she was nearing her winglet's set of caves after walking for a good minute or two; she was getting good at navigating the school. Moon had just turned a corner when she collided with someone. A flash of crimson was all she saw before steadying herself.

"Watch it, shadow-muncher," a gravelly voice hissed.

Moon craned her neck slightly, and then wished she hadn't. She was staring at a SkyWing, about as muscular as Winter, but just a smidge shorter. It was clearly a male, and a scarring injury crossed one side of his snout, the scales seemingly melted away. He was holding a small jar of a thick black liquid, and he smirked when her eyes drifted to it.

"You're lucky none of this spilled on you," he said. "Want to take a guess as to what it is?"

She shook her head, beginning to walk away when he stepped in front of her, blocking her path.

"It's dragonviper venom," the crimson dragon said with a twisted

grin. "I'm coating my claws in it to make them extra black. It's the only way to get them dark enough; you can't buy this at a store. Only dangerous while it's still wet, though. Want me to demonstrate?"

Moon noticed with a pang of dread that one of his claws was slick with the substance. Before she could do anything to stop it, he lightly brushed one side of it on her arm. It wasn't much, but it was enough to cause a horrible burning sensation on the spot where it had been wiped. Tears of pain instantly welled up in her eyes, and she forced herself not to touch it.

"Hurts, doesn't it?"

"Y-yeah..." she said softly, refusing to meet his orange eyes. "Isn't that illegal? I mean, it has to break some sort of law-"

In a split second, the SkyWing had her pinned up against the wall he'd recently been leaning against, his yellowed teeth uncomfortably close to her. She could feel his hot breath against her scales, and attempted to squirm out of his grip. It was useless, though; he was far too strong to allow that.

"You tell anyone you saw me doing this, and I'll use a LOT more venom next time," he snarled. "Got it, NightWing?"

Moon nodded furiously. She just wanted to go to her cave and grab her scroll. Was that too much to ask?

He let her go, and she sighed with relief. He had already started walking off, probably looking for a more secluded place to do his handiwork.

"If there's one thing you remember about what just happened, remember this," he said, turning around for a moment. "The name's Flame, and don't you forget it."

Then, he was gone.

Moon wiped her eyes with the arm that didn't have the claw polish on it, then continued on her way to fetch her scroll. Before she did, however, she saw two quote boards hanging from the ceiling in the

same spot. That was unusual enough, if not for what they said.

The first one read, *"Don't depend on anyone too much in this world. Even your shadow leaves you in the darkest times."*

And perhaps even more ominous was the second: *"Not trusting anyone may protect you from getting hurt, but it also stops you from finding the one."*

❄Chapter 8: Thoughts●

Winter knew something was wrong as soon as Moonwatcher came back to class. There was a different look in her eyes, possibly fear, if not anxiety. And if his eyes weren't deceiving him, he saw a small spot on her left arm where the light reflected off her scales differently, almost unnaturally. He had sharp eyesight, so he was sure he wasn't mistaken. Now wouldn't be a good time to talk about it though, not in the middle of class. He decided it would be better to wait until passing period, even if not knowing what had happened was killing him.

When the three gongs finally rang and everyone flocked out of the room like geese heading south for the winter, he caught up with Moon and pulled her aside in the hallway. They continued walking to their next class, but he focused more on the talking.

"What happened?" he asked, not wasting any time building up to the question.

The NightWing looked bewildered, but also slightly relieved. "You know?"

"I'm good at observation," he replied. "So spill it; what happened when you were gone?"

She looked away for a moment. "I'll tell you, but you have to swear you won't tell anybody else. I'm not even supposed to tell *you*."

He didn't reply, simply staring at her, hoping she would get on with it. He had to admit, he was concerned by how shaken she had looked before.

"This SkyWing, Flame, I think..." she started. "I ran into him by accident when I was going to our cave. He was painting his claws black, and he said the polish he was using was made with dragonbite viper venom. It must've been illegal, because he immediately told me not to tell anyone."

Despite the raging inferno inside him after hearing what she'd said, Winter was able to keep his voice steady. "Or what?"

"Well, he put some of the polish on my arm, sort of as a threat, saying he would use more if he found out I told anybody. It was only a little, but it hurt so bad...it's like touching a hot pan or something, but it stings too, and lasts for at least a minute."

Winter realized he was grinding his teeth a little. He didn't know why, but hearing Moon's story made him angrier than he'd been in a long time. He wasn't even this angry when he'd had a run-in with that notorious SkyWing. So why did he feel like this now?

"I won't tell," he said. Moon immediately relaxed. "But I have a couple other questions."

Two gong strikes.

"You should probably make it quick, then," she said, but not in a hostile or threatening tone. Rather as more of an advisement.

"First, where were you last night?" He hadn't seen her at all throughout the evening the previous day, and he couldn't be sure, but he suspected it had something to do with the scuffle in Qibli's cave.

Moon shrugged. "I found a vacant cave and decided to spend the night there. What's the other question?"

Winter wanted to know why exactly she'd been absent last night, but had a more personal question he wanted answered. Personal for him, not so much her.

One gong. Luckily, they had arrived at history, but were standing outside the doorway.

"Why *did* you tell me what happened, if you weren't supposed to tell anyone?" he questioned, his tone growing soft. Partly so nobody would overhear; he didn't know the other reason.

Instead of looking away or pretending to be distracted by something else, the NightWing stared right into his cold blue eyes. He almost wanted to shift his gaze for once, but something made him unable to break it. And surprise, surprise, his idiot brain couldn't figure out what it was.

"I think it's because I trust you," she replied, equally as quiet. "I know we've only known each other a few days, and we both know you're not exactly the nicest guy around...but for some reason, I don't think you're the type of dragon to break someone's trust. Now come on; we should get to our seats before Webs yells at us," she finished with a slight grin.

Winter stood there, dumbfounded as she walked into the classroom with her leather satchel at her side, her tail ever so gently brushing against his. He had no clue if it was on purpose or accidental, but it triggered something in his mind. It was like a new area of his brain had been unlocked, one filled with strange new feelings. It seemed less...sophisticated than the rest of his brain, and he had no idea how he could tell the difference. All he knew was that this was new, it was strange...and he kind of liked it.

How can she trust ME?! I'm like...the most untrustworthy dragon I know! Wouldn't Qibli, or Turtle, or Kinkajou, or literally anyone besides me be a better dragon to tell a secret to?

He quickly slipped inside as well, knowing fully that whatever this new feeling, or area of his mind was, he would be thinking on it for awhile yet.

The next morning...

"Winter, it's supposed to go *here*," Moon told him in a slightly sharp tone. "You're doing it wrong."

"Well how am I supposed to know that? I'm not an expert on this!"

"We learned about it yesterday. You should at least know that the nucleus goes IN THE MIDDLE."

Got you guys for a minute, didn't I? Hehehe. Ok I'll stop.

Today in science class, Clay had assigned them their first project of the year: building a model of a cell. It hadn't sounded so bad at first, but it was proving to be more challenging than he'd thought. The only supplies they were allowed to use were styrofoam, clay, tape, scissors, and glue. At the moment, he and Moon were struggling to get the nucleus in the right spot. They'd already built the "cytoplasm" using the styrofoam, but they would need to add another layer later for the cell membrane.

"Here, give it to me," the NightWing said, taking it from him before giving him a chance to reply. The nucleus was simply a medium-sized ball of purple clay, and she quickly dug a small depression in the center of the styrofoam using her claws, then sticking the nucleus in that spot.

Moon turned back toward him with an expression that said, 'See? How hard was that?'.

"Fine, do it your way," he snapped. "Let's just make the rest of the cell parts and then we can worry about where they go later."

She silently agreed, grabbing a chunk of red clay and beginning to mold it into...something. It looked like she was making the Endoplasmic Reticulum with how many folds she was making, so he decided to work on the mitochondria if she would be doing the more complicated ones.

All Winter remembered about the mitochondria was that they looked sort of like beans, so he went for that approach with a piece of orange clay. After a couple of minutes, Clay, the teacher Clay, stopped by to check on their progress.

"You two might want to do less arguing and more working," he advised. "You only have until the end of class, and tomorrow I'm going to walk around to each model and you'll have to explain what each cell part does."

That got Winter's attention. "You never told us that!"

"Well, I believe I just did," the MudWing said with a cocky grin, before limping off to check on other groups.

Moon giggled a little to his right.

"How is that funny? We only have until the end of class to work on it; otherwise we'll have to complete it as homework!"

"I just find it funny that Clay keeps roasting everyone without meaning to."

He tilted his head. "How can you tell he's not doing it on purpose?"

She suddenly stopped smiling. "Uh...lucky guess?"

All he gave for a response was "Hmph."

By the time class was over, all they had on the model including the nucleus was the mitochondria, Endoplasmic Reticulum, and Golgi Apparatus. They would definitely need to work on it later. Winter asked Clay if they could take some clay to their cave so they could work on it, and to his relief, he agreed.

They walked out of class, Moon gingerly carrying the model in her talons like it would shatter into pieces at any second.

"I can take the model and the clay to our cave," she told him. "You can get to history class; no offense, but I know my way around here better than you do."

"Finally, something we can agree on," he said with a smile. "But I'll come with you. To make sure nothing happens to the model," he added when he saw a surprised look on her face.

Or to her.

For whatever reason, a pink hue appeared on her face, but it quickly subsided. "That's sweet, Winter, but I think I can handle myself."

Now it was his turn to blush.

She started to walk away, but he stepped in front of her. "No, I insist! I can even carry the clay if you want," he persisted.

Moon sighed, however there was a smile creasing her face. "Alright, but don't say I didn't warn you when we end up late to history class."

She handed him the container of clay, and they both headed to their cave at a brisk pace, knowing there wasn't much time to lose.

It wasn't until they were already there that he realized what he'd just done.

I've got to be kidding myself. Did I just...TRY and succeed to spend more time with a NightWing? What is going ON with me lately?!

The pair hastily dropped the model and clay off at their cave, before quickening their pace even further so now it was more of a jog than a walk.

"I never noticed that necklace you wear until now," Moon observed as they hurried to class. "Does it mean anything to you?"

He glanced down at the necklace thumping against his chest as they went, the two silver circles on it mocking him for even being in the presence of this dragon.

"It means everything..." he replied, more solemnly than he'd planned.

A brief moment of silence passed over them, interrupted by one final gong from the Great Hall.

"Did you always have that accent?"

"What accent?" he questioned, not sure what she meant.

"I don't know...there's just a slight hint of some accent in your voice," she responded. "Like how you sometimes say 'a' like 'ah' and stuff."

Winter shrugged. "I've always spoken like that. I never really *adopted* that manner of speaking, per say."

"Oh. Well, I kinda like it."

He didn't know whether to feel embarrassed or not. Instead, he simply focused on getting to history class on time. Unfortunately, they scampered into class just a bit too late, the Green SeaWing known as Webs fixing them with a harsh glare as they entered.

"You two are late," he scolded. "I can't say I'm surprised that Winter is, but you, Moon," he said with a slight nod to her, "I expect more from you. I'll be seeing you both after class; now take your seats."

"Yes sir," they mumbled, quickly walking to their separate desks as the gazed of nearly everyone in the room turned to them.

Winter was never more glad to not have his sister here at the moment. The other winglet they had this class with was the Silver Winglet, and none of them bothered him much, unlike some of the dragons in the Gold Winglet. There seemed to be tension between Moon and a SeaWing named Anemone, but he couldn't figure out why.

He and Moon sat a little closer together in this class, her desk directly behind his. He sat in the front row in this class, but not by choice; Webs had assigned all of them to their seats on the first day.

The teacher cleared his throat, walked over to one of the many maps in the room, and began a lecture about the geography of Pyrrhia that would span the whole period. They were all expected to take notes, but he never told them what to right down, just saying to write whatever they felt was most important about the lesson.

At the end of class, he and Moonwatcher stayed behind while

everyone else shuffled out of the class, eager to move on to something more interesting. Winter pondered if there was going to be some sort of punishment for them, hoping there wouldn't be, as they already had the science project to work on later. The pair stood at Webs's desk, each second passing by feeling like an eternity as he stared at them both for several moments.

Finally, he took in a slow breath and then exhaled just as slowly, apparently trying to calm his nerves.

"Look, you two," he said, in a surprisingly kind - or maybe even understanding - tone. "I understand that school is a new place. It is for all of us. You're meeting new dragons, becoming more independent, and more self-sufficient and responsible as well. However, with that responsibility and independence comes expectations. If you can't meet those expectations, this is going to be a rough year for the both of you."

"Excuse me," Winter said in what he hoped was a polite tone, "but what does this have to do with-"

"I'm not done," Webs interjected a bit sharply. "What I'm trying to say here, is that I get you both are exploring more things, and forming relationships with one another, but you still have to be on time to class. I was your age too, once, you have to remember that. So keep school stuff in school, and don't let other things get in the way of your responsibilities as a student here. Got it?"

They both nodded. Winter felt the blood rush to his face, and glanced over and noticed the same had happened to Moon.

"Thank you, sir," she said. "But, we weren't doing...whatever you think we were. We had to take a science project to our cave so we can finish it later."

For the first time, Winter noticed a smile on the grumpy history teacher's face as he sat down at his desk.

"Alright, I'll buy your story," he replied, digging something out from a drawer at his desk. "But I'm good at reading dragons; I can tell when there's more going on between them." He gave them a

hall pass. "Now get on your way; and don't let me have to talk to you about this again."

Winter was relieved to exit the classroom, and it was no secret that Moon felt the same. She quickly grabbed her satchel, he retrieved the map of the school, and they went on their way.

Moonwatcher sat with her friends at the prey center, but once again, Carnelian sat alone. Kinkajou repeatedly asking the easily-angered SkyWing to sit with them didn't help, and neither did Qibli trying to charm her, or bargain with her, or whatever he attempted to do to get her to join them. She wasn't sure if the red dragon actually *enjoyed* being on her own, or if she was just doing it to preserve whatever reputation she had going for her.

After Qibli gave up, he went back to sitting uncomfortably close to her just as he had done for the past couple of days. She thought someone as clever as him would've gotten the hint by now when she scooted away from him, but he didn't seem to, or just did and didn't care. Either way, she didn't like it, especially not after hearing him harassing Winter two days ago.

"Qibli, I don't think Moon wants you sitting so close to her," Kinkajou finally said in the middle of lunch.

Moon didn't look at him, but did overhear some disappointed thoughts emitting from the SandWing.

"I'm sorry," he apologized, but from just glimpsing his mind, she knew he didn't mean it. "Here, I'll move away a little."

She was relieved that Kinkajou had spoken up, because things were weird enough between her and Qibli without her telling him. She continued eating her half-eaten deer carcass, but stopped when a familiar voice snarled at her.

"Well well, if it isn't the lying little NightWing," Flame hissed, his already unpleasant voice laced with venom. "I thought we had a deal, runt."

Moon reluctantly looked up to see the red dragon looming over her to her left, a glare that could cut diamond fixed on her.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she replied, trying to avoid his gaze.

What if my friends find out? They'll surely tell a teacher, and then I'LL get in trouble for not reporting what happened in the first place! But how did he find out? The only dragon I told was...

Moonwatcher suddenly scowled at Winter, who was sitting a few feet away. "You told?!" she hissed. "I trusted you!"

He suddenly grew wide-eyed. "No I didn't! I promise you, I never told anybody!"

She did a quick sweep of his mind to see if he was telling the truth; she tried to avoid doing that at all costs, but right now she had to, to see if she had made a mistake trusting him. Thankfully, she could tell he wasn't lying.

Moon softened her gaze. "I'm sorry. I guess I just panicked."

"Uh, don't mind me asking," Turtle said, speaking for the first time during lunch, "but what's going on here?"

"I'll gladly explain," Flame snarled. "This little rat saw something she wasn't supposed to see yesterday, and then snitched on me when I told her not to. That is what happened."

Kinkajou suddenly piped up, her scales an angry mix or red and orange. "Hey genius! You do realize you just openly admitted that you were doing something against school rules to five dragons, right?"

The bloodred dragon snorted. "So?" he said, acting like he didn't care, although his thoughts told a different story.

I'm such a MORON. I can't stop all five of them from telling; and I can't threaten them either. I can't take all of them in a fight, and I think that IceWing has a grudge for me...why am I so STUPID?!

Moon felt sharp claws lock around her left arm and she was hauled to her feet by Flame, his orange eyes like twin infernos of rage directed right toward her.

"Stop!" she said, trying to raise her voice as much as she could despite her fear. She tried to wrench herself out of his grip, but like yesterday, it did nothing to help the situation.

"You're gonna pay, lizard. Just wait until I-"

Flame suddenly yelped in pain, jumping slightly. He still had a firm grip on her, and didn't seem like he was going to release her anytime soon.

"Let her go. Now."

Moon was shocked to see *Winter* of all dragons with one foot planted firmly on top of the SkyWing's tail, a vicious look of ice cold hatred filling his strikingly beautiful eyes.

Flame's expression faltered only for a second, before being replace by his normal angry look. "You wanna go, icehead? 'Cause I'll throw down right here, right-"

He cried out again as a blast of frostbreath nearly coated his leg, before submitting and letting her out of his grip. Moon immediately walked several feet away from him, and although her heart was still racing, she stepped away from Qibli when he tried to put a wing around her in comfort.

"You guys can stay if you want," Winter said, not looking any of them in the eye as he removed his foot from Flame's tail, "but I'm going to take my leave. Somebody finish the last of my lunch, will you? If not, just throw it outside; something out there is bound to eat it anyway."

As he vacated the scene and the fuming SkyWing stormed away, Moon glanced at her winglet, who were looking on with mixed expressions of confusion and anger. Then she looked at Flame, who had gone to harass some other pour soul, and decided that it was right for Winter to leave.

"I think I'm going to follow him," she said. "I don't really want to be here while Flame is still around, and class is starting soon anyway."

As she turned and began to leave as well, Qibli spoke up.

"Is that really why, or are you just looking for another excuse to be alone with him?"

A surge of anger swept through her at his comment, but she didn't want to escalate the situation further than it already had been. Plus, the SandWing's mind was a storm of emotions and thoughts at the moment, and stirring up an argument wouldn't be good for anybody.

She didn't go silently, however.

"That's none of your business, Qibli," she retorted, before she speedwalked to catch up with Winter, his icy tail disappearing around the corner as he left the prey center.

"You followed me, huh?" he asked, startling her as he had stopped just outside of the entrance. "I'm guessing you came to thank me? It's no big deal; you don't have to say a bunch of corny stuff about...well, anything, really."

Moon paused as they both awkwardly stood there for a moment, trying to avoid the other's eyes.

"I guess I don't have to now," she mumbled. She looked at him only for a second, but it was long enough for her to notice a strange look on his face; guilt, most likely, for killing the mood, or for whatever else. Maybe regret, but it wasn't likely coming from him. Then again, he had just helped her out in the prey center...

Winter coughed a little to break the silence. "Well, I..uh...just want you to know, I didn't lie to you about not telling anyone what happened to you. I swear the only dragon I told was myself, if that even makes sense."

His pitiful attempt at reassuring her brought a smile to her face.

"Don't worry, I believe you," she said, and they started walking to math class.

Although she knew it wasn't Winter or anybody else in their winglet since none of them had been present when she'd told him, one question still lingered in the back of her head: who *had* overheard and told Flame, and why?

● Chapter 9: New Students ●

The next week or so passed relatively uneventfully. Aside from the occasional school project or run-in with Flame - none of which escalated too much since Winter was often with her when they happened - nothing very exciting happened. Moon kind of liked it that way, but she could tell it was getting to Kinkajou.

"It is just me, or has everything been so BORING lately?" the RainWing asked as Moon was helping her with math homework in Kinkajou's cave. It was Saturday, and the only class that occurred on weekends was hunting. "I like action and drama! I wish more stuff like your little rivalry with Flame would happen around here. Has he done anything to you like he said he would?"

"One thing at a time, Kinkajou," Moon said with a small grin. "I personally like it this way; it means I can focus more on schoolwork. And I think Winter has more of a rivalry with him than I do; I'm pretty much just on the receiving end of all of this. And no, he hasn't gotten the chance to follow up with those threats with Winter around most of the time."

"It that so?" Kinkajou said in a sly tone, her scales shifting to a slight pink hue to combine with her already yellow-orange scales. "Seems like you two have been hitting it off lately, hmm?"

Moon had grown so used to dragons making remarks like that that she didn't even blush anymore when it was brought up. Well, maybe just a little. "We're only friends, Kinkajou; it's way too early on for us to be anything but. Besides, if I was with him, or any other IceWing..."

She didn't have to finish the sentence, for they both knew it would be disastrous.

"I'm just saying," the small multicolored dragon replied. "Anyway, did you figure out number four? I had to skip it."

Moon slipped into deep concentration over it, then stopped after a minute when Kinkajou made a face. She realized she was chewing on the end of the RainWing's pencil.

"Sorry," she apologized. "I don't try to do that. It just happens when I'm concentrating."

Before Kinkajou could respond, Sunny's voice directed their attention to the entrance of the cave. They both stood up, having been laying on their stomachs while they were working.

"Good morning!" the golden SandWing greeted them cheerfully. "Sorry if I interrupted, but your winglet has two new students who just arrived this morning." Sunny turned her head to the right and beckoned what must've been them forward. "This is Sparrow and Karma."

Sparrow was a red SkyWing with an orange underbelly, somewhere between Moon and Winter in terms of height, but with a build similar to that of Qibli's: lean, but slightly muscular at the same time. She seemed a little shy by the sound of her thoughts, but gave them a warm grin anyway.

Wow, that NightWing is really pretty! I bet I can find someone to match her up with in no time! I'll have to see what her personality is like first, though. That RainWing seems really happy and energetic...I don't know many dragons like that...she might be more tricky.

It appeared that Sparrow liked matchmaking, which for Moon, wasn't good. She was specifically trying to AVOID that, and if this SkyWing thought she and Winter were a match...this was going to be rough.

Karma looked like a mix between an IceWing and NightWing, seeming to be close in height with Winter, probably a couple inches shorter. She was still taller than Moon, though. She resembled an IceWing in terms of her body shape, flaunting all the spikes and shine of one, as well as the unique shape and positioning of her scales that all IceWings had. Her underbelly and face were where the NightWing side of her began to show; her lower half was jet black with thousands of white speckles scattered across them,

spiraling like fireworks did after they exploded. They looked even more like stars than those same markings on NightWings! And starting right between her eyes and leading all the way down the flat part of her snout, was the same pattern as her underbelly, except the white markings had no specific pattern to them.

Another NightWing, huh? Not like I haven't seen a million of them before... Karma thought, although not with hatred like Moon would've expected. *The tiny rainbow there seems a little too perky for my tastes, but I can manage. Where are all the IceWings? I want to see what they normally look like...*

That was strange. It sounded like Karma had never seen an IceWing before. That led Moon to believe that she was raised in the rainforest around NightWings, but if that was the case, why hadn't she seen her before?

"Sparrow will be staying with you and Turtle," Sunny told Kinkajou. "And Karma, you'll be in that cave, with Qibli and Carnelian," she said, pointing to the middle cave. "Make sure you show them around and make them feel at home here, okay? Tell that to the rest of your winglet as well."

The golden dragon walked off, and Sparrow entered the cave slightly hesitantly. Moon didn't think much of it as Karma entered her new cave. Not until she saw the hybrid turn for a moment, and she realized that she was missing a wing.

When Qibli, Carnelian, Winter, and Turtle all returned from whatever they'd been occupied with, Moon and Kinkajou introduced everyone outside of the three caves; there wasn't enough room for all of them to fit in any of them. Carnelian wasn't exactly happy to see the two new dragons, but nobody was surprised by that.

"She's a bit of a grouch," Moon heard Kinkajou whisper to Sparrow. The SkyWing smiled, stifling a giggle. The two of them had already gotten along well and found a lot in common, and it had only been just over an hour.

Meanwhile, Karma was obsessed with Winter, having never seen a true IceWing before.

"I'm sorry," the hybrid said when he gave her strange looks as he walked in a full circle around him. "I've never seen an IceWing in my life."

"You're a hybrid between an IceWing and a NightWing, and if that wasn't weird enough, you don't know what one of your own parents looks like?" he asked, a spiteful tone in his voice that wasn't welcome.

Karma was clearly a little offended by this, but she continued examining him. "Look, it's not my fault my mom walked out on me and my dad as soon as she found out a had a birth defect. I never saw her enough to remember what she looked like, and me and my dad always stayed in the rainforest. Even on the rare occasion one of your tribe would visit, he never let me see them. He says that they might try to hurt me, or call me names or something, me being a hybrid and all."

The whole group fell silent.

Qibli sucked in air between his teeth. "Ouch. Bet you feel like a jerk now, Winter."

"Shut up," the IceWing hissed, jerking himself away from Karma as she lifted up one of his wings to look at the underside of it. "That's enough," he told her, before retreating into his and Moon's cave.

The rest of their winglet continued talking like that never happened, but Moon clung onto Winter's thoughts for a moment, not exactly able to tune them out anyway. Even though he had just insulted Karma unintentionally and acted like nothing was wrong with it, she could tell he felt bad.

After a couple minutes, they all went back to their caves, except for Moon, Kinkajou, Sparrow, and Karma, who ventured off to go explore the academy. As they left, she heard Kinkajou say something to Sparrow, something that she couldn't help but agree with herself.

"Winter's a grouch sometimes, too."

Sorry that this chapter was a little short, I just wanted to introduce all the new students. And there are still 3 more I'm going to add, so don't worry if yours wasn't featured! If you want to submit an OC now, too bad, requests are closed. I've got 5 of them on my plate at the moment. BTW, Karma is *my* OC. Cataclysm138, out!

●Chapter 10: An Opportunity❄

Look, before this chapter starts, I just wanted to let you guys know, once again, how amazing all of you are. I try not to be one of those guys who goes 'OMG I LOVE YOU GUYS SO MUCH YOU ARE THE BEST I CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT YOU', okay, but it's hard to contain myself sometimes! I've recently checked the demographics of this story, and we've got readers from all over! The US is where most of you are based, but there's also Canada, Germany, Vietnam, Malaysia (I hope I spelled that right), Australia, and South Korea! Malaysia, Vietnam, Germany, and South Korea surprised me most, but anyway, let's get on with it, shall we?

Moon was thankful there hadn't been classes today, because it turned out to be kind of tiresome trotting around the whole academy for hours, introducing Sparrow and Karma to all the teachers and showing them where their classes were, the prey center, the underground lake, and pretty much everywhere else in the school. They got lost frequently, having never explored some parts of the tunnels. Now, she was alone, although by choice; she hadn't been able to fall asleep after half an hour of tossing and turning in her leaf bed. She'd tried everything from reading to counting sheep, but nothing was working. Moon had decided that taking a walk might help her wind down a bit.

Sure enough, after what she assumed was around ten minutes, the NightWing started feeling drowsy and thought it would be wise to call it a night. She should've realized beforehand how stupid wandering the halls at night was, especially when she was exhausted.

With her mind in a foggy haze of drowsiness, it was easy for Flame to ambush her as she was walking back to her cave. One moment she was on her own in the dark halls, the next she was up against a

wall, his sharp talons at her throat.

"Looks like nobody's here to save you now, huh?" he snarled at her, his rank breath hot against her scales. "It's just you and me, NightWing, and don't you think that just because that IceWing helped you out before doesn't mean I forgot about our unfinished business!"

Moon tried to scream, fight back, do anything to get out of this situation, but he was far more alert than her. He clamped the talon that had been holding her throat over her mouth, slamming his knee into her stomach and knocking the wind right out of her. It was hard to tell what he was holding in his other talon, but the silhouette suggested it was a nail polish bottle.

How could I let this happen? Again?!

Flame brought the bottle up to his mouth and popped the cap off with his teeth, determined to not release his hold on her this time. "Trust me...this is going to hurt so bad, you'll wish you were dead before it's even halfway over."

The rotten SkyWing eased it closer to her arm, a crooked grin creasing his face as he did so. Moon moved as far away from it as she could, which wasn't far at all, considering the circumstances.

I wish somebody, ANYBODY were here right now...I can't do anything; he's too strong.

The only thing that came to mind were her powers, but mind reading and visions of the future weren't exactly made for combat. Still, Moon tried with all she had, attempting to mess with his head or something, if that was even possible. However, nothing happened. She was helpless.

"What do you think you're doing?!" a voice as deep as Flame's, but not as gravelly, came from the right.

The crimson dragon startled, clearly not expecting Winter to sneak up on him like that. Moon definitely hadn't, but it may have just been the worst mistake he could've made right then.

As Flame jumped out of fear, the bottle slipped from his talons, its contents splattering all over Winter's chest.

Moon and Flame both stood, watching in horror as the pale blue dragon collapsed, an agonized scream erupting from his mouth as he clawed at his scales, as if tearing his chest right open would cease the extreme pain plaguing him.

She looked to her left and saw Flame going extremely pale, his eyes bigger than saucers. She had a feeling he hadn't anticipated that the results of the venomous polish would be so terrible. He began to race off, but she caught him by the shoulder before he could. He whirled around and slashed his impossibly black claws across her arm, and she responded by punching him in his disfigured snout. There was a sickening CRUNCH, and she knew she'd broken his nose as he went unconscious, blood quickly flowing from his nostrils.

Winter continued roaring in pain, writhing like a dying animal on the tunnel floor, his arctic blue eyes crackled with veins as they darted this way and that. They finally rested on her, a pleading expression on his face.

Why isn't she doing anything? Can't she see I'm practically DYING here?! This hurts so muuuuch...

The IceWing's thoughts cut off after that, as he emitted more cries of agony. By now a crowd was gathering, several dragons woken from the noise of it all. They all stared on in shock, but none of them did anything. Moon recognized one of them as Icicle; she wasn't sure if she and Winter were brother and sister or something, but she knew they were related somehow.

"Icicle, please," Moon said, rushing over to her. "Can you go get help? I don't care who it is, as long as it's Sunny, or Clay, or some other adult who can handle this, but will you please find someone?"

The female stared at her in disgust, and Moon could tell she wanted to refuse. However, Icicle took another look at Winter over her shoulder and then darted down the hall, another NightWing following her. It looked like it could've been Bigtail, but it was too

dark to know for sure, the fire globes only lit in certain areas of the hallway.

Moon sighed in relief, turning around to go see if she could help Winter in any way, only to notice five sets of familiar eyes staring at her from the opposite end of the tunnel. It was the entirety of her winglet, even Carnelian and Turtle.

They all came running over to her, several questions spewing out of their mouths at once. Karma was already kneeling down by Winter, trying to get him to calm down. Moon felt some sort of twinge in her chest, but shoved the feeling away, knowing there were far worse problems at hand.

"What happened?" Kinkajou asked her, her scales an overwhelming mix of green, white, blue, and spots of red here and there.

"Flame cornered me again," Moon admitted, feeling her eyes well up with tears, partly from the pain of her arm. "Winter tried to help, but Flame had this toxic nail polish made with dragonbite viper venom, and it got spilled on him, and then Flame tried to get away, but-"

Moonwatcher could hardly speak, her breath coming in short hiccups. Blood was sleeping from her fresh wound, Flame was out cold on the ground, Winter was in agony...everything was a mess, and half the school had gathered to witness it all.

The small RainWing hugged her, clearly hoping it would make her feel better. Qibli did as well, but if anything, all it did was make her feel worse. Not only did it look incredibly bad that she had been standing here, a SkyWing knocked out and an IceWing writhing in pain before her, but now it looked like she was being a sensitive crybaby.

After a minute of Karma trying to get Winter to calm himself, she gave up and walked over to the rest of them, letting Sparrow have a go. Soon after, what seemed like every staff member in the academy arrived, even Starflight, who seemed very anxious, as he couldn't see what was going on. Fatespeaker and Webs were there as well,

but to be honest, the dragon Moon was most grateful to see was the school nurse, who quickly pushed his way to the scene before them all. He was carrying a small briefcase and he set it down on the floor as he attended to Winter first.

"This is some kind of venom, right?" he asked Moon, simultaneously calming the agonized IceWing.

"Yeah," she said, breaking away from her friends. "It's dragonbite viper venom."

The SeaWing made a clicking sound with his tongue. He opened up the briefcase, which contained three hypodermic syringes (**medical needles**), each filled with a different colored liquid. He removed one that had a blue liquid inside.

"Antivenom," was his one-word explanation, before he inserted the needle into Winter's arm and injected it. The pale blue dragon was unconscious within moments. "Don't worry, that's normal," the nurse assured them all as he put the needle back in the case and snapped it shut. "He should be alright now, but he'll definitely need to rest a couple of days, if not more, before he's back to normal." He then proceeded to patch up Flame, but the Jade Winglet was more concerned about Winter, and how they were going to get him back to his cave.

The students and staff around them began to talk amongst one another, and Moon squinted her eyes shut as their thoughts were even louder than their words.

"Okay everybody, back to sleep," Clay boomed. "C'mon, leave them be," he said to the few stragglers.

And then, even the nurse left, carrying Flame with him, to his office judging by his thoughts. Now, they were all alone.

Winter woke up lying on his back, faint rays of sunlight entering his and Moon's cave through the window. The sun hadn't fully risen yet judging by the fact that it was still considerably dark outside,

but the familiar NightWing was waiting patiently next to his icy ledge all the same.

His immediate thought was to get up, uncomfortable with her staring right at him. He attempted this, but quickly decided to stay put as that awful burning sensation from earlier flared up in his chest.

"Are you alright?" Moonwatcher asked softly, her scales glinting with orange light. "You've been out for almost six hours now."

Why does she care? Why do I *care that she cares?!*

"Things could always be worse, so yeah, I'm fine," he said before he could stop himself. "I'm...uh, sorry you had to deal with all that." Winter felt a rush of embarrassment as he remembered flopping around on the floor like a fish out of water, screaming to the point where his lungs burned. Then that feeling was replaced by rage as it came back to him that Flame had caused that. However, he had startled him and in turn the SkyWing had spilled that black concoction all over him, so he was partly to blame as well.

Moon shook her head vigorously. "Don't apologize; it's my fault for being so stupid. I shouldn't have been walking around at night after everything that's been happening with Flame."

"But I was the one who tried to stop him. *I* shouldn't have gotten so close to him before revealing that I was there."

She sighed, but he saw a hint of a grin on her face in the darkness. "Well, thank you for trying to help. I know you only wanted to do the right thing. Also, you're stealthier than I thought you'd be; I couldn't even tell you were there!"

Winter forced a smile. "You're welcome. And I took extensive stealth training back home, so I know a thing or two about staying hidden. Like the expression goes, never show all your cards."

She tilted her head at him. "I've never heard that saying before."

"That's because I may have possibly just made it up."

The NightWing giggled for a second. "You're something else, Winter."

The duo sat in awkward silence for a moment, one half of their faces hidden in shadow, the other illuminated by the golden sunlight shining through the window.

"The nurse said you'll have to stay here and recover for at least two days," she informed him. "I'll make sure I bring any assignments you'll need to make up her after all my classes, but that's not until tomorrow. I think after everything that happened last night, it would be best for both of us to just relax today."

Winter nodded. "That sounds kinda nice."

"And if I have to go somewhere, I'll make sure someone else is nearby so they can help if you need anything," she said.

That offended him a little. "I'm an *IceWing*, okay? I can handle myself for a few minutes if you're gone."

She was quiet after that, and he worried if he'd annoyed or angered her once again. Moon turned away from him and opened a scroll, laying on her side with her back to him. He hadn't realized this before, but she had moved her pile of leaves and moss close to his bed. Was she really that concerned about him? And if so, then why?

Winter found that if he moved much at all, pain flared up in his midsection. He was basically immobile, which was not good; he HATED just sitting around and doing nothing. In the Ice Kingdom, it was expected of everyone to always be doing something productive, and that had seared itself into his mind so that it was a part of everyday life. To keep himself occupied, he did one of four things: thought to himself, iced over his bed once it began to melt, read a scroll, or stared at his moon globe.

"Don't mind me asking, but what exactly *is* that?" Moon questioned when she saw him fiddling with the glowing object. She placed her arms on the edge of his bed, putting one on top of the other and resting her head on them as she gazed at the item.

"This?" he asked, as if it wasn't obvious. "It's called a moon globe. You can only get them in the Ice Kingdom; they grow on a special tree that an animus created thousands of years ago, before even Darkstalker was around. When we still *had* animus dragons," he said with spite, "they had to create something that would benefit the tribe. Her name was Frostbite, and she gave our tribe the gift of light."

"That's pretty cool - no pun intended," she said with a smile. "Can I hold it for a minute?"

He was reluctant to do so, but he let her examine it.

"And what happened to the IceWing animus dragons?" Moon asked as she played around with the moon globe, rotating it to adjust the light. "You talked about them in the past tense."

Winter gave a *huff* sound. "Stolen by your filthy ancestors. That's what happened."

She ripped her gaze away from the globe and locked it onto him. "I don't appreciate you talking about my tribe like that," she spat. Once she had cooled off, she asked "But how do you *steal* animus magic?"

He wasn't startled by her sudden burst of anger like he had been the first couple of times. "Animus magic is inherited. Prince Arctic was our most recent animus, but Foeslayer stole him away from our tribe thousands of years ago. He had dragonets with one of them - presumably her - and then was killed several years after. As a result, there could still be a NightWing animus out there, but there will never again be an IceWing animus unless that NightWing would breed with someone from my tribe. That is what happened to our animus dragons, and it's also why I'm supposed to hate you and the rest of your tribe even though I just can't!"

The room fell into uncomfortable silence. Moon had taken her full attention away from the moon globe, now exerting it toward him instead.

"You *don't* hate me?" she whispered, softer than he'd ever heard

her speak before.

Before he could reply, his vision caught a flash of movement outside the cave entrance. There was nothing there, but there was a slight wobble to the air. Picking up a small pebble, he flicked it over in that direction. There was a dull pop as it connected, followed by an "Ow!" from a spying Kinkajou.

"Didn't you ever learn to mind your own business?" he hissed as she materialized outside the doorway.

"Winter, leave her alone," Moon said. "What he meant to say, is could you please not eavesdrop on us, Kinkajou?"

"That's not what I-" he started to say, but stopped himself as Moon shot him a glare sharper than a dagger.

"Okay..." the small RainWing whined, her scales becoming a cloudy blue as she left them alone.

They waited a moment to make sure nobody else was spying, the continued with their conversation.

"Winter, you shouldn't be so rude like that," Moon scolded. "All you have to do is ask nicely."

"That's not what I was taught," he replied. "Anyway, no, I just...I try to find every reason I can to hate your guts, but I can't. I'm supposed to loathe you and your kind, but I guess I just know that you never had any direct relation with what happened to our animus dragons. It's not your fault, nor any other NightWing's, but my tribe just doesn't seem to understand that."

"Oh," was her response. "Well, I'm glad you don't hate me, because even though you can be a bit much sometimes," she said carefully, "I don't hate you either."

Those five words remained stuck in Winter's head for the rest of the day. True to her word, Moon only left when she had to, and she even brought back some food for him when she went to the prey center. They passed time by playing little games like 'I Spy' or 'Twenty Questions', or reading. She did most of the reading though;

Winter was never the best reader, as his tribe didn't focus too much on literature. He didn't mention this to her, though, and didn't plan to.

It was towards the end of the day when Moon was out talking to a teacher about something, when Winter was approached by a large SkyWing. He was as large as Clay, but far more muscular. There was a good chance he was a hybrid between a SkyWing and a NightWing, as his underbelly and wing membranes were jet black, while the rest of him was dark red, almost as dark as Flame. He had the body of a SkyWing as well. What intrigued Winter the most was the many knives and other blades strapped to his arms and legs; he was astonished he was allowed to carry those with him inside the building. There was also a sword on his back, and he was holding a stack of flyers.

"Hello!" the stranger said, letting himself in. "Before you tell me to leave or something, I'm only here to give you this." He handed Winter one of the flyers. "The name's Argo; that's all you need to know."

"Argo, hurry up!" a female voice called from the hallway.

"Give me a break, Cynthia, I've been in here for twenty seconds at most!" he shouted back, before flashing a grin at Winter. "That's my girlfriend. We argue sometimes, but everybody does, am I right?" Without another word, he left Winter's cave, leaving him to examine the piece of paper he'd been given.

'Join the Midnight Marauders! Do you or your friends ever feel unsafe walking the halls at night? If you answered yes, you should consider joining what will be an elite group of guards patrolling the academy at night! I will only choose the best of the best, so you'll have to be ready for anything! Come to the Great Hall on Wednesday after classes to learn more.'

No doubt was this about what had happened last night concerning him and Flame. He knew he would be a good candidate, considering all the training he'd been put through back home, but did he really want another responsibility outside of schoolwork?

Well, if it means protecting Moon and everybody else…sign me up.

❄Chapter 11: Tryouts❄

It was Wednesday afternoon, and Winter was fully healed from the incident that took place Saturday night. The only visible sign that it had happened at all was a slight black tinge to a large portion of the scales on his chest, but the nurse had assured him it would fade away with time.

Now, he was walking down to the Great Hall to try out for the Midnight Marauders. He had barely left his cave when Qibli jumped out at him.

"What's up, Winter?" the annoyingly clever SandWing said. "Heading down for tryouts?"

For whatever reason, he'd decided to tell Moon about the opportunity he had chosen to take. Kinkajou, being her eavesdropping self, overheard, and soon the entire winglet knew about it and was planning on attending the tryouts. Spectators were allowed, unfortunately.

Winter replied with a grunt, not sure what Qibli was up to. He continued on his way and the yellow dragon followed him, the SandWing stopping only when there was nobody else in the hallway.

"I thought I told you to stay away from Moon," Qibli hissed, although no physical force was used this time. "I can tell you're still up to something."

"Well, if you had more than one brain cell," Winter snarled, "you'd remember I never agreed to your terms. And we share the same cave; I can't exactly avoid her."

"I probably have five TIMES the capacity of your brain, Winter,

and if you don't step off, there's going to be hell to pay."

Qibli began walking off, but Winter caught him by the arm.

"You better stop making those kinds of threats, sand-snorter."

"Or what?"

Winter smirked. "Because I doubt Moon would like to know you've been trying to blackmail me into avoiding her. And maybe I'll just tell her you have a massive crush on her if this continues."

Qibli paled for a moment. "Oh yeah? Well now *you're* blackmailing *me*. I could tell her that."

"What would be the point in that? Then she wouldn't like either of us."

Qibli ripped his arm out of Winter's grasp. "Well, it's certainly better than letting you have her."

The SandWing spat at his feet, then stormed off in the opposite direction. Something told Winter he wouldn't be attending the tryouts. Then again, maybe he had never planned to.

"Listen up everyone, because I'm only going to say this once," Argo ordered as he paced back and forth in front of the line of nine students. He wasn't wearing his weapons, but they were close by, in a pile several feet away. "I will be choosing only the best of you to be members of the Midnight Marauders, so you need to give this all you've got. I don't care if you're sick or injured, you're going to work just as hard as everyone else, because in battle, your opponent won't care either."

Winter knew that last sentence was directed at him. He looked beyond the pacing hybrid to the wall behind him, where several dragons were watching this all unfold. It included everyone in his winglet but Qibli and Carnelian, as well as a few unfamiliar faces.

Then he looked down the line of dragons he stood in, accounting

for everyone in it. There were three IceWings: himself, Icicle, and a new student who had arrived on Monday, Blizzard. He was a purplish-blue IceWing, and rarely spoke, but his constant scowl spoke his words for him. There were no MudWings. The only RainWing was Flowerbringer, but she was a bit tricky; she was a RainWing/NightWing hybrid, but there were already two NightWings, so she was considered a RainWing for this. She had the body of a NightWing, but her scales could change color. Usually she showed the pattern of the closest flower to her, and judging by how white her scales were, Winter assumed the nearest flower was a daisy. The NightWings were Bigtail and Fearless, and of course Flame had to be there, the SeaWing was Pike, and the final dragon was a SandWing named Pronghorn.

"Now, I'm going to determine who will be on this team by seeing how well you perform in combat. Against me," Argo said with a grin. "After all, the best way to do that is to be *in* the battle! Of course, Cynthia over there will be a secondary judge," he added, pointing to the hybrid standing several feet away from all of them.

"Secondary?!" she shouted, but he didn't reply.

"Now, who would like to go first?"

Not me, not me! If I go first, everyone will be expecting me to be the best out of all of them! If that doesn't happen, can I really call myself an IceWing? he thought, fiddling with the necklace hanging from his neck. *These two circles don't mean anything if I'm not the best!*

Nobody volunteered.

"No? Alright, form a circle around me," Argo commanded. They all did so in a timely manner. "I'm going to close my eyes and spin around; whoever I face once I stop will be the first to go, and I'll pick the rest of you as I see fit." And then he started to do just that.

Winter crossed his claws together, praying to everything that it wouldn't be him.

But, it seemed the universe was not on his side today, as Argo stopped and faced him directly. The hybrid beckoned him forward.

"Wooo! Go Winter!" Kinkajou shouted from the spectators' area. "You can do it!"

Argo smiled. "I was going to ask for your name, but I no longer need to. Now, fists are acceptable, but no bloodshed. That goes for all of you," he said. "You have one minute to show me what you've got. Go!"

Winter had no time to prepare before the larger dragon had him in a headlock almost instantly, putting pressure on his neck and making it difficult for him to breathe.

Wow, he's fast...okay, did I learn about this back home? If I did, I don't remember...well, my arm is close to his face, and one of my legs is close to his...don't panic, Winter, that's how mistakes are made...

He swung blindly with the arm close to Argo's head and felt his enclosed fist connect with something hard, presumably his jaw or cheekbone. It certainly caught the hybrid off-guard, or maybe Argo just wanted him to think that, but either way, he stumbled a little and it gave Winter a window of opportunity to kick him in the back of his knee. Argo fell backward and landed hard on the ground, letting go of him in the process. All this had happened in ten seconds or less, so Winter knew they were just getting started.

He was able to reorient himself, but Argo was already back on his feet. He looked like he was enjoying this, a smile spread across his face.

Once again, however, the hybrid took control of the fight, tackling him to the floor and pinning him there. He was able to land a couple of forceful punches to Winter's face and chest, but the IceWing quickly heaved him off using his back legs. The circle of dragons cleared as Argo skidded a few feet before jumping up once more. A few cheers broke out from the spectators, increasing Winter's motivation to keep fighting.

The hybrid rushed at him again, but he was able to dodge it this time, tripping him up in the process. Not surprisingly, Argo was back up within seconds, and Winter was baffled by how quickly he was able to do so.

The two were suddenly locked in a grapple, neither of them wanting to give up the power to the other. Winter's first thought was to try and kick his opponent in a particularly sensitive area, but Argo blocked it. So instead, he punched him hard in the stomach and he stumbled away, doubled over holding his midsection. The minute still wasn't over, but Argo held up a talon.

"You're good," he wheezed, out of breath. "And you didn't waste time...talking, like a lot of dragons do. You're a natural. Now I'm just gonna...lay here, for a minute..." Argo collapsed onto the floor, his eyes shut tight in a grimace. "You can go relax or do whatever for now...but stay here. I'll tell everyone who made it at the end of all this."

Winter smirked. He knew the hybrid had gone easy on him, but winning the fight was still as satisfying as it had always been. He walked over to the sidelines where most of his winglet was waiting, greeted by a few 'Good job!"s, and "Congratulations!".

"You must have lots of training or something!" Kinkajou exclaimed, her scales becoming a bright mix of yellow and rosy pink.

"Yeah," Karma agreed. "I've never seen anyone fight that well!"

Moon half-smiled at her. "Then you haven't seen Deathbringer."

"Who?"

"Queen Glory's bodyguard. He doesn't usually have to fight, but it's usually over in a few seconds when he does. It's rumored that he was trained as an assassin from a very young age."

Karma still wore a blank expression on her face. Winter didn't care much, either; he'd heard things about the NightWing, but never showed much interest.

"I bet you all five bucks Winter's gonna be on the team," Sparrow challenged them all.

"You don't even have the money, do you?" Turtle asked.

The SkyWing looked like she was going to say yes, but then she just shook her head.

The rest of the dragons went up against Argo, few of them succeeding like Winter had. He watched them with mild interest, studying their combat styles. Especially Flame. When the scarred dragon fought, he observed him carefully in case he would ever need to fight against him. Flame's technique was effective, but a little cowardly. He repeatedly darted away from his opponent, then would charge forward to deliver a light blow, then would retreat again. His punches weren't very powerful, and if they were allowed to use their claws it would've been more effective, but over time it left Argo a little confused, constantly having to watch him. In the end, he grabbed onto Flame's arm when he darted in and twisted it behind his back. The SkyWing had struggled for a few seconds, but ultimately admitted his defeat. Although he lost, Winter knew he would most likely make the team as well.

Bigtail was the third most challenging, at least from Winter's perspective. He was a hard-hitter for sure, and although he didn't land blows very often, when he did, they sent Argo reeling. He recovered pretty quickly, but not quite as fast as the trained instructor. He was defeated as well, when Argo tripped him up and pinned him to the floor. Out of everybody there, the only other dragon who beat him was Icicle. Winter didn't have to watch her to know how she fought. She was a master at diverting her opponent's attention and confusing them. One of her favorite tactics was to prod them in the back, and when they turned to look, she would either trip them or punch them right in the face. This didn't work on Argo, though; he seemed too experienced to fall for that. But in the end, she was able to twist her tail around his back leg and trip him, and he ended up falling face-first onto the floor. She finished the job by pinning him to the point where he gave up.

Once everyone had gone, they all regrouped in a line as Argo stood in front of them.

"I'll admit, a few of you gave me a run for my money," he said with a smile. "That was actually kinda fun. Me and Cynthia have spoken, and we've decided which of you will be joining the Midnight Marauders. If I call your name, step forward."

Winter felt himself subconsciously grinding his teeth. He hadn't realized how much he wanted to join this team until now. Maybe it was some sort of desire to be part of something bigger than himself. Or maybe he just wanted to protect his friends. Or it could be both. Either way, he was silently praying he would be called.

"Flowerbringer. Fearless. Blizzard. Pike."

The four students stepped forward, looking as bewildered as Winter felt.

Them?! Those were the worst out of all of us! They probably only came here because they had nothing better to do! How come THEY made it, but me or Icicle didn't, when WE were the only ones who actually beat him?

"Unfortunately," Argo said unexpectedly, "you four didn't make the cut. Please exit the Great Hall, and continue with your day."

None of them seemed to care too much besides Pike, who seemed disappointed. It seemed that Winter had been right about most of them coming only for something to do.

After they left, he turned to the rest of them.

"Congratulations; you five are now officially members of the Midnight Marauders."

❄Chapter 12: Feelings and Fighting●

[image]

Over the next couple of months, Winter could tell he and Moon were growing closer. He wasn't exactly certain how he felt about this yet, but one thing was for sure: he had changed, maybe for the worse. The old him would've stopped hanging out with her long ago, but this new side of him was stirring the pot, so to speak. He often found himself jumping at the opportunity to spend any amount of time with her, especially now that she was working on her own in the library most of the time after classes. Homework had really started to pile up lately, and everyone was feeling the heat, in more ways than one.

Not like THAT, you perverts. I may have made a joke or two, but this isn't turning into a mature story; that's the last thing I want right now.

It was mid October, and today was unusually hot for this time of year. It had to be at least ninety degrees, and the humidity only made things worse. It was a Sunday, and the heat of the day had just started. Going to the underground lake wasn't an option, since it was packed full of dragons, especially IceWings who needed to cool off. After the recent events of Winter standing up for Moonwatcher at the prey center, none of his own tribe wanted anything to do with him, excluding his sister. They were still on thin ice, but she had at least started talking to him again.

The SandWings were thriving in this heat, many of them sunbathing like RainWings outside, including Qibli. Meanwhile, the rest of them were hunkered inside their caves, taking advantage of any opportunity they had to reduce their body heat. Winter was

suffering especially, not being able to even go for a swim with the lake the way it was; IceWings weren't built for these kinds of temperatures. At the moment, he was using a sheet of math homework as a makeshift fan, unfortunate enough for the sunlight to be pouring in through the window and onto his ledge. Icing it over was pointless, as it quickly melted and he didn't have the energy to be constantly doing so.

Moon wasn't doing so well either, her black scales absorbing the heat more than anyone else's. The only dragons worse off than the IceWings were her tribe, as dark colors tend to absorb more heat and faster than other colors.

It was so hot, in fact, that Winter didn't even notice that the sunlight had caught his homework on fire until Moon informed him.

"Winter, your homework is on fire," she said in a monotone voice, making it seem like she hardly noticed.

He, on the other talon, hurriedly jumped to his feet, threw the parchment on the floor, and stomped out the small flames before they could cause any serious damage. It only took him five seconds, but he was panting by the end of it.

"Thanks," he said, hearing his voice slur a little. He was starting to wonder if he might pass out from the heat, but considering the fact that Moon was drenched in sweat and had managed to stay conscious so far, he was probably a ways off from that happening.

"We have to do something about the heat," the NightWing said, as if it weren't obvious. "I can't keep fanning myself with a piece of paper." Just as the words slipped past her lips, it began to burn as well. She shrieked, dropping it and stomping out the fire like he had. The brief period of time made it seem like she had just flown across Pyrrhia with no breaks, as drops of sweat fell from her brow to the floor. "What are we going to do?"

"I'm not exactly sure," he admitted. "We should try to find someplace, or some*thing*, cold, but where on this continent would we find that besides in the Ice Kingdom?"

He noticed Moon gazing at him with those incredibly green eyes of hers, feeling mildly uncomfortable for a moment.

"I can think of something," she said, a hint of playfulness in her voice. He already knew what she was up to before she began approaching him like she did when she was stalking prey: on all fours. He'd seen her hunt enough to know when she was about to pounce, and now seemed like that time.

He slid to the right as soon as she leaped at him, but she focused on him once more as soon as she touched the ground.

"Just stand still!" she urged. "It'll be easier for both of us!"

Winter tried to hide his half-smile. While this was quickly getting tiresome with the heat, it was sort of fun.

Moon leapt again, and this time he didn't bother moving; he knew she would just catch him eventually. Her forceful leap knocked both of them to the floor and she quickly latched onto him, stealing the frigid temperature of his scales away from him as her body absorbed the coldness.

"Sorry," she apologized as he stood up, unbalanced by her weight. "But it's so hot out, and you're an IceWing, so you were pretty much asking for it." The NightWing refused to let go of him, her arms and wings wrapped around his chest.

Winter found himself unable to reply, the foreign feeling of her smooth scales pressing against him overwhelming. He couldn't recall if he'd ever hugged anybody before, but if he had, it certainly hadn't been anyone but an IceWing, and it DEFINITELY hadn't felt so...peculiar.

Do I like this? I...think I do. Is that bad? What am I saying?! Of course it's bad! I'm pretty much committing treason here. If any other IceWings saw me, it wouldn't matter if it was Icicle, or Hailstorm, or my parents...they'd rip out my intestines and eat them for dinner. But, if this is bad...then why does it feel so good?

Winter knew he shouldn't - and almost always wouldn't - do

something like this, but he did the unthinkable. He hugged her back.

Moon seemed surprised by this, however she grew accustomed to it rapidly, shuffling closer to him - if it was even possible for the two to BE any physically closer - and resting her head against his chest.

The pale blue dragon was trembling a little, beads of sweat running down the side of his face. Whether it was from the heat, Moon's body heat spreading to him, or just the overall feeling of being in this situation, he couldn't quite tell. Actually, the third thing was more plausible now that he thought about it. The whole experience felt strange and unnatural, but fantastic and like it was meant to happen at the same time. He could hear his own heartbeat faintly, that's how loud it was, and he could feel hers as well. Both heart rates were almost in perfect synchrony; did that mean something?

Winter's mind was racing so fast, trying to comprehend all these things at once, that he didn't notice Sparrow, Kinkajou, and Karma all standing outside their cave staring at them. As soon as he did, he immediately pulled himself away from Moon, but she didn't complain, having noticed the three as well.

A brief moment of silence washed over the group, first broken by Kinkajou, who let out an ear-piercing, excited squeal.

"Soooo, when did this become a thing?" the small RainWing asked, her scales varying shades of pink and white, a huge grin spread across her face.

"It is absolutely NOT a thing!" Winter growled, feeling his face turn deep blue. "It's hot out, and *she* for whatever reason thought it would be a good idea to steal *my* coldness like a leech!" he insisted, gesturing to Moon, who seemed more than a little insulted at his remark.

"Well whatever the reason, it was *adorable*!" Sparrow exclaimed. "I knew I would be able to matchmake here, and it looks like you two will be my first pair!"

Karma didn't speak, but she had a crestfallen look on her face. Winter knew that look; he'd turned down a couple girls before back home, not having feelings for them like they had for him. That was the look they always gave him, and it appeared that simply hugging Moon had basically ruined Karma's day. Winter knew right then, that she must have those feelings for him. They didn't spend as much time together as he and Moon did, but she was still fun to be around most of the time. He just didn't like her that way, and he knew he would have to tell her sooner or later. Preferably sooner.

"You know what, I'm just gonna leave," he said, throwing his arms up in the air. "I'm not getting involved, I'm not getting involved, I'm not getting involved..." he repeated as he shoved past all three of them and left his winglet's caves. He didn't know where he was going, but he knew it would have to be cold, and as long as it was far away from here, everything would be fine.

Winter was rudely awakened by a sharp pain in his side. He sat up, still alert as he had only been asleep for maybe fifteen minutes. After walking away from his winglet, he'd flown outside and found a small river near Jade Mountain that had seemed like a nice spot to cool off for a bit. Now, a familiar pale yellow dragon stood over him, prodding him in the side with his tail. Thankfully not the sharp, venomous end, as the barb was curled up safely.

"How's it going, moron?" Qibli spat.

"Great," Winter snarled. "At least it was, until you showed up." He stood up, seeing the SandWing about to talk. "Save it, sand rat; I'm guessing somebody told you Moon hugged me, and now you're here to say something like 'I warned you' or something else like that."

Qibli glared at him. "Yes, I was going to say something along those lines. And yes, Kinkajou blabbed all that to me a little while ago. And before you ask how I found you, all it took was for me to follow the sweat trail. Seems you're not doing so well, huh? Bet you wish you were a SandWing right now, built to withstand the hottest of temperatures."

Winter scoffed and rolled his eyes. "In your dreams. You wouldn't last five minutes in the Ice Kingdom. Now can we get this over with?"

"With pleasure," the SandWing growled, dropping down to all fours. Winter remained standing, although he exited the river.

Qibli leaped at him, his sand-colored claws outstretched toward his face. Winter ducked, then punched him forcefully in the gut as he sailed overhead. He landed with a splash in the edge of the water, groaning in pain.

The IceWing walked over to him. "I thought you were smart, SandWing; I'm part of the Midnight Marauders. It was foolish of you to pick this fight to begin with. Now if you'll excuse me, my shift starts in an hour," he said as he looked at the darkening sky.

He turned his back on the whimpering dragon, spat in the grass, and then headed back to the academy.

Winter was patrolling the halls with Flame tonight for the first three hours; after that, two other dragons would take over for the rest of the night. Argo required them all to travel in pairs in case anything happened, but after numerous weeks on the job, Winter knew they mainly existed to instill fear in anyone that thought about trying to attack someone at night. So far, nothing that escalated to a fight had ever happened.

Argo probably didn't think that maybe the members of the Midnight Marauders would be the true threat.

Winter and Flame hadn't spoken for the whole time aside from a few insults hurled back and forth. That was the way it was whenever they were partnered up for anything. It was nearing the time when they would switch out with Icicle and Bigtail, and they were walking to the arranged meeting spot to do just that.

That's when things turned sour.

Flame began whistling some tune or another, and Winter didn't

think anything of it. That is, until he realized it was a signal. Three other SkyWings and a NightWing approached them from in front and behind; two of them had been waiting around a corner, the others tailing them for the entirety of the shift it seemed.

Winter recognized the NightWing; it was Fearless, one of the dragons that was rejected when he tried out for the team of security. Hatred burned in his eyes as he glared at Winter. Two of the SkyWings had switchblades in their talons, and he knew he'd been set up before they got close.

Winter was about to either run or start fighting, but somebody kicked the back of his knee from behind and he stumbled forward into the firm grip of one of the SkyWings. They grabbed hold of his arm and a second orange-red dragon did the same to the other arm. The two forced him down onto his knees, and as soon as he started struggling against their hold, the third unfamiliar SkyWing slugged him in the face, then clamped their claws around his snout so he couldn't use his frostbreath.

Well, I am officially the biggest idiot in this academy. I never should've let myself be paired with Flame...

"Nice job, boys," Flame complimented, a twisted sneer on his face. He took one of the blades from a SkyWing that was holding him down and handed it to Fearless, who was now standing in front of him. "Hey Winter, remember how you so gallantly came to that NightWing's aid in the prey center?" he asked mockingly. "Well, since you never let me even things up with her, Fearless and I decided to even things up with you. He wanted to be on this team more than anything, isn't that right?"

The dark-scaled dragon nodded, wearing a grin identical to Flame's.

"Don't worry, Winter," the NightWing said. "This'll only hurt a lot."

Winter had to escape somehow, or this would get messy really quick. He would bite down on the talons holding his mouth shut, but they were doing this in such a way that didn't allow him to. So, he did the next best thing: tried to scream, and thrashed around

wildly in the grips of these SkyWings.

All he got for his efforts was another punch to the face.

His heart was pumping faster than he'd ever felt before, but he could do nothing but wait as Fearless slowly brought the knife to his arm. He was trapped, helpless. Alone.

The NightWing slowly drew the switchblade down his left arm, making the pain that much worse as blood as dark as the ocean began to ooze from the open wound. Winter screamed again, and got struck once more. He knew he would have a black eye in a few hours, if not sooner. Fearless continued sliding the knife down the length of his arm, and as soon as he reached the wrist, he stopped, preparing to do the same to his right arm. Fresh, hot tears ran down Winter's face, and he was ashamed for giving them the satisfaction of seeing him cry.

Before Fearless could place the blade against his scales, however, the grip was released on his right arm, the sounds of a struggle breaking out behind him. Flame was next, an icy fist slamming into his jaw and knocking him to the ground. Winter knew it was Icicle and Bigtail; it only made sense that they would've come looking for him and Flame when they didn't show up to switch out.

A surge of adrenaline flowed through his blood, and he threw the dragon holding his bloody left arm off. The dragon holding his snout let go for a fraction of a second, and Winter bit down hard on their claws. They roared in pain and stumbled away. He jumped to his feet but lost his balance, as they had gone numb during the ambush. Before he knew it, Fearless was on top of him, holding the tip of the switchblade to a spot underneath his lower jaw. Winter felt blood leak from what was now a fresh wound, but it didn't stop him from rolling over and pressing all his weight down on top of the NightWing. He wrenched the knife from his grasp and tossed it aside, but in that short time, Fearless wrapped his talons around his throat and began trying to crush his windpipe. Winter didn't bother trying to unclamp his talons, instead raking his own serrated claws across the dragon's face. Fearless screamed and let go, his own talons flying to cover the set of bloody claw marks on his cheek. Winter didn't stop, lambasting him with several punches to the face

and chest. Finally, the NightWing went unconscious, and Winter got off of him, exhausted - and frankly, terrified - from the whole ordeal.

"Are you okay?" his sister asked him, walking over to examine his injuries. She winced at the wound running the length of his arm, but he barely felt any pain. He knew that was bad, as it meant he could be going into shock.

"Do I *look* okay?" he hissed, wiping the tears from his eyes with bloodstained claws. "I never should've trusted that...that...I can't even think of anything that can scratch the surface of how much I hate that snake!" he roared, pointing at the now-unconscious Flame. It seemed Bigtail had just finished fighting two of the other SkyWings, as he approached them from where their two bodies were lying.

"They're not...dead, are they?" Icicle asked him, but there was more curiosity than worry in her tone of voice.

Bigtail shook his head. "Just knocked out. I can't believe these scumbags..." he snarled, spitting at Flame. "Seems like he in particular is making quite a foul reputation for himself. Think I should go tell Argo about this?"

"Definitely," Winter replied, his voice shuddering. He was definitely going into shock. "I want to make sure that worm gets what he deserves," he said. "He shouldn't have been allowed to try out in the first place with everything he's been doing lately."

"You could say that again," Bigtail replied. "I'll go talk to Argo. Icicle, will you bring all of these guys to the nurse? We can't have anyone seeing a bunch of bodies lying all over the place."

She nodded. "I need to take Winter there first. C'mon, let's go," she told him.

Winter didn't respond. Actually, he couldn't. She had to pretty much drag him through the hallways to the nurse's office, as he had gone into shock by now. He could barely think, and when he did, half of what he thought made no sense. All he knew was his arm

hurt like someone had poured salt in the wound, and there was pain underneath his jaw as well.

By the time his sister managed to get him there, he had passed out.

(2 days later...) (Moon's POV from now on)

Moon was worried about Winter.

Not only because he had gotten hurt two days ago, but because it seemed like he kept constantly getting into trouble, especially with Flame. This was the third time he'd gotten hurt this school year, and it was only October! First with the crocodile, then with Flame, and then with Flame and Fearless.

But why did it seem like she was more concerned about him than anybody else?

She didn't have much time to dwell on that thought at the moment, as she was gently holding a small chicken egg while she walked to their cave. It was for a project they had to do for art, although it wasn't even related to that class for the most part. She would've walked back to their cave with him, but Kinkajou had wanted to talk about something after class. Hopefully Winter was already there.

He was, which didn't surprise her in the least. He always seemed to get to places before her.

"What took you so long?" he asked jokingly.

Moon smiled; he was getting back to his normal self, it seemed.

"You should try carrying a chicken egg through the halls when there are a bunch of dragons who don't know how to give others some personal space," she replied as she set the egg down next to him on the ledge.

"Everyone usually avoids me in the hall, so I don't have to worry

about that. Especially not after this," he said, pointing to the sewn-up injury on his arm. The cut under his jaw hadn't needed stitching, only a bandage that was still there from two days ago.

"I still can't believe Fearless did that. I'm not surprised that Flame set it all up, but still..."

Winter shrugged, although his arctic eyes turned stormy for a moment. "You can never predict some dragons. How long do we have to keep that thing safe for, again?"

Moon glanced at the blue and black egg. In art, Sunny had first given a chicken egg to a pair of two, then told them to paint it before telling them the purpose of it. Neither of them could agree on what to paint it, so they'd each chosen a half and painted it how they wanted. It turned out decent for an egg painting. Winter had painted his half light blue, and Moon chose to paint a night sky on hers.

"A week," she replied. "We can't let it crack or break, remember?"

"Pfft," he scoffed. "I didn't get stabbed in the brain," he said, a slight edge to his voice.

"I know, it's just that sometimes you can be a little...impulsive. Remember when you nearly broke the window after you were angry about something?"

"That was *one* time!"

Moon rolled her eyes. "I'm just saying. Anyway, how *is* your arm doing?"

"Better than it was, at least," he replied. "It hurt a lot more at the time than it does now. But then again, I could barely feel any pain for half the time while I was in shock, so...yeah."

She forced a grim smile. "You're really lucky to be alive, Winter. You know that, right?"

"Of course I do! Why would you think I don't?"

"I mean, you haven't been talking about it much," she explained.

"That's because sometimes it's easier to pretend it never happened than it is to remember."

Moon wondered if he was just saying that to get her off his case, or if he really believed that. If he did, then to her, that was really sad. She didn't want to read his mind, but he was the closest dragon within the vicinity, so she really couldn't help it. After a quick skim, it did seem like he believed what he'd just told her.

She sighed; how long would it be until somebody found out about her powers? She'd gone two months without leaking the secret, but she could only keep hiding it for so long. Neither of them had forgotten the prophecy from just a couple of months ago, although Winter didn't know it was one. Actually, maybe he did; she just couldn't tell as long as he wasn't thinking about it currently. That was one of the many drawbacks to her powers, but she was glad she couldn't go snooping around in someone's head like that. It would only make everyone hate her even worse once they found out.

What if Winter finds out? I've spent forever trying to earn his trust, and I think I finally have, at least for the most part. I don't want that to go away! And Kinkajou is practically my best friend, or the closest thing to one. Sparrow and Karma are pretty nice too, and Turtle is sweet and innocent. I'm not entirely sure if Carnelian likes me, but I know Qibli does...

"Moon!" Winter snapped, drawing her out of her thoughts. "Shouldn't we keep the egg somewhere besides the floor?" he asked, the frustration in his voice clear. It seemed talking about his injury had angered him. If it wasn't that, she didn't know what else it might be, but something had clearly pissed him off. Maybe it was because she'd been zoning out.

"Sorry, I was thinking about something," she apologized. "But where else would we put it? If we put it on a ledge it'll fall off, and we could step on it accidentally if it's on the floor."

The IceWing appeared to ponder this. "Maybe we could put it in your little pouch thing, as long as you take everything else out of

it."

It seemed like an accident waiting to happen, but it was the best they had right now. As he had suggested, Moon emptied her satchel, then placed the fragile egg carefully inside. If there was nothing else inside it, surely she wouldn't have a need to take it anywhere and risk the egg breaking. Right?

Included in the small collection of items she'd removed from the pouch was a clump of green herbs. The nurse had instructed Winter to eat some of them every day to ease the pain in his arm, but Moon suspected he hadn't been, as he had complained about the taste the first time he'd taken them.

"Winter, you should probably take your herbs," she advised him.

He shook his head. "I'm NOT eating those again; they're too bitter and hard to swallow. Plus, I'm completely fine without them."

"Oh really?" she asked. The NightWing walked over to him and placed a small amount of pressure on his arm, no more than if she'd lightly pinched him. However, he immediately yanked his arm away, telling her that wasn't the case.

"I'm still fine," he insisted.

"Uh-huh," Moonwatcher said skeptically. "Just take them, please. They'll make you feel a lot better."

Yet again, he refused. It looked like they would have to do this the hard way.

This was going to be a long week.

●Chapter 13: Cold Snap●

[image]

Not to brag, but I feel like I've been rocking these titles lately! Idk why I feel like sharing this, but I just heard some obnoxious sound that reminded me of a goose honking, a small dog barking, and one of those squeaking chicken toys all at once outside my window. Ok, I'll get on with the chapter now. Also I just put the picture above because of cold snap in the title; it isn't freezing where I live, thank god. We had a brutal winter. But unfortunately, I believe I'm getting the flu again. I Googled the early symptoms, which include runny nose, sore throat, and fatigue; all of which I've been feeling for the past couple days. It seems influenza isn't done with me yet. NOW onto the story!

Moon sat in a dark, cozy corner in the school library, curled up on a pile of soft leaves with a scroll clutched in her claws. Like many mornings already, she had come to the library in search of a new scroll to replace one she'd recently finished. Normally she would've gone to the fantasy section, but today was different. She had felt some urge to take a look at the nonfiction scrolls, seeking something related to the topic of NightWing powers. There weren't many, since her tribe's powers were supposed to be a big ruse, but eventually she'd found one about the War of SandWing Succession - as it was being called - that would hopefully have some information about NightWing powers. Moon had always thought the name for the war that had plagued the continent for so long was stupid; it sounded too sophisticated. Why couldn't they name it something shorter, less tongue-twisting?

Moonwatcher scanned the scroll, disheartened to not find anything specific about NightWing powers other than the fact that they'd

'never existed in the first place'. However, there was one sentence that told her where she might be able to learn more about them, if she could find the right item.

"For more about the supposed powers of NightWings, read 'The Biggest Lie in History' by Stargazer the NightWing," she read aloud softly. "Funny that a NightWing would write about that."

Moon put the scroll back where she'd found it, satisfied with this new information. She then walked over to Starflight, who was somehow folding an origami bird at the counter despite his blindness.

"Hey Starflight?" she asked.

The librarian set down the folded paper and looked right at her. It was more than a little unnerving, but he'd gotten much better at locating things based on what he could hear or feel. Fatespeaker was still by his side most of the time though. Either she still didn't believe he could fully function on his own without any major problems, she had nothing better to do, or she had underlying feelings for him and just wanted to spend more time with him. It could be a combination of all three, but she didn't dawdle.

"Morning," he greeted her. "Need help with something?"

She almost said no, but forced herself to mutter "Yes." Moon knew she had trouble socializing with dragons she wasn't super familiar with, especially if she needed their help. She always thought she would be inconveniencing them in some way, but it was his job to help students. "Do you know if there's a scroll here anywhere called 'The Biggest Lie in History'? I think it's about the powers that the NightWings made up during the war."

He tilted his head curiously. "Yeah, it should be over in the realistic fiction section. Can I ask why you're looking for it since none of it is true?"

Now she found herself getting a bit flustered. "It's for...a personal project. Thanks!" she said, hurriedly ending the conversation and walking over to the realistic fiction shelves before he could ask any

other questions.

Why didn't I think of realistic fiction?! I know I'm usually smart, but sometimes I just don't use my head...

After less than a minute of searching, she found it. Removing the scroll from the shelf, she noticed the parchment was slightly yellowed. That made sense: after all, the war concluded less than a decade ago, but that was still long enough for the paper to yellow. A thin layer of dust covered it, which she dusted off. It seemed this hadn't been touched at all so far.

Moon skimmed through it, amazed at everything it described about the rumored powers of her tribe. Not so nonexistent in her case, but for everybody else on Pyrrhia - or at least to the best of her knowledge - everything in here would be a lie. The scroll told about what the cause of these powers was thought to be, as well as different ways NightWings had claimed to be able to use their powers. There was even a small section about methods used to ease the pain that mind-reading could cause; that was the most important part to Moon, as it had been why she was looking for a scroll on this topic in the first place.

She still had fifteen minutes until classes started for the day, but she knew that wouldn't be nearly enough time to uncover everything this scroll had to offer, so she requested to check it out.

"Sure thing!" Starflight said when she asked. "I'll need your check-out scroll, please. And if you have the other scroll you borrowed last week, could I have it as well?"

Moon realized with a sinking feeling that she had neither of them with her. "I'm sorry," she said. "I must've forgotten them at my cave. I'll go get them right away!"

The purplish-black NightWing chuckled. "Don't worry, I'll keep this safe while you get them," he said, motioning for her to hand him the scroll.

Moon did that, thankful that he couldn't see her blush in embarrassment as she scurried out of the library.

As she was getting nearer to her destination, a horrible, sickening feeling suddenly materialized in her gut, as if she'd just swallowed a large chunk of something not meant to be in her stomach, like metal. At the moment, it didn't occur to her that maybe it was her body subconsciously warning her of what was about to happen, because at that precise time, pitch black talons locked around her neck and she was forced up against a wall, exactly like she had been almost two months ago.

Moon would've screamed if her breath wasn't currently being cut off.

"You remember me, right NightWing?" Flame hissed, flecks of spit spattering onto her face. "You were supposed to be taught this lesson long ago, but you had to go and break my already disfigured, ugly snout." She heard his voice falter for a moment, and she realized that was one of the main reasons why he was always angry. He hated his disfigurement, and that was why he was such a jerk to everyone; he was just trying to take his mind off of it, or distract himself from thinking about it all the time, or something else like that. "So now, your punishment is going to be two times as worse." He produced a knife from behind his back. "Two times...as deadly."

"I wouldn't have had to hurt you if you hadn't hurt me first," she gasped. He only tightened his grip on her neck, forcing any remaining air out of her lungs.

"No no no," he scolded. "That's not how this will work. You see, you're going to keep your mouth shut, I'm going to do what needs to be done with my little friend here," he motioned with the knife, "and nobody's ever going to know. Capeesh?"

Moon frantically nodded, though she had no intentions to play along.

"And just to make sure you *don't* talk," the corrupt SkyWing snarled, "I'm going to do this..."

He slammed a fist into her lower jaw and Moon heard the CRUNCH of bone cracking, immense, unbearable pain erupting as a result. She whimpered helplessly, tears flowing from her

eyes. Flame was unfazed, reminding her of just how morally messed-up he was to not have any emotional reaction to others' suffering.

She suddenly heard a gasp to her left. There was a nerdy-looking MudWing standing several feet away, witnessing this unfold.

"Don't you dare!" Flame roared at them, before they dropped to all fours and bolted down the hall, clearly going to tell someone about what was happening. The SkyWing let out a frustrated growl. "I'm going to make this quick; you'll have that dense moron to thank for it," he said, wasting no time in pressing the blade to her cheek and making a clean, but extremely painful cut that must've been about three to five inches long based on the area where more pain immediately sprung up. He brought the knife to her right shoulder and made another swipe, thankfully not digging in very deep with it, but still causing searing pain.

Moon's tears were flowing freely now, and she wished for one of her friends to see this; they would at least try to help. But most of all, she wished for Winter. Maybe she could stall Flame, or fight back, do something to give her a window to escape.

The SkyWing's grip on her throat lessened for a moment, and she quickly drew in a sharp breath before letting it out in the form of a scream, knowing it would attract some attention from anyone nearby. Which turned out to be several dragons.

"Hey, let her go!" a stranger shouted at Flame. Their eyes widened and they backed off, however, when he bared his teeth at them and spat a burst of fire their way.

Moon was suddenly punched in the already tender spot on her face. "You're SO dead the next time we run into each other," Flame growled, but he still didn't let her go.

Moments later, more students arrived at the scene, and the MudWing from just a couple minutes ago came back with Starflight and Fatespeaker; neither of them seemed very combat-ready, but they were probably the closest adults around. Technically not adults yet, but pretty close to it, anyway.

"Flame, you drop that poor NightWing now!" Fatespeaker ordered, approaching them. "You bet your tail you're getting expelled after this, suspended at the very least!"

Flame rolled his eyes. "Like I care. This place is a dump; I never wanted to be here to begin with."

Starflight's companion seemed very peeved at his disrespectful remark, as she tried to tackle him. He tripped her up easily though, then without letting go of Moon, stomped down on a spot between her neck and shoulder blade.

"Fatespeaker!" somebody cried.

"What? What happened?" Starflight asked, obviously starting to panic.

"I knocked out your girlfriend, that's what," Flame retorted.

Moon was relieved to hear that she wasn't dead or seriously hurt, but none of this made the situation any less tense. During an argument that quickly sparked between him and Starflight, Flame's grip on her slipped for a fraction of a second too long. Moon threw him off of her and he stumbled backward over Fatespeaker's unconscious body, landing on his back. The blade of the knife snapped when he landed, but he simply tossed it away with a curse before getting back up.

She didn't waste time examining her wounds or anything, as he was coming straight for her like a charging bull, anger like she'd never seen before in his dark orange eyes. Moon tried to avoid it, but he adjusted course and pushed her to the ground anyway, pressing his weight down onto her so she was unable to move once again.

"You know what, scum?" he snarled, his voice shaking as she tried to fight back. "I might just kill you now."

He punched her in the mouth, and Moon felt warm blood trickle out of it. He'd probably knocked a tooth loose. Sure enough, amid the salty tang of blood, she felt something triangular rolling around

in her mouth. Luckily, dragons grew teeth back in a matter of days, so it wouldn't be much of a problem.

Especially not if she died here.

Flame locked his claws around her throat once more, literally squeezing the life out of her. Her vision began to darken and go fuzzy.

"You know something?" he asked. "It won't even matter when you die, because all you are is a rotten, introverted, shy little runt that nobody cares about."

Moon wouldn't have responded even if she could, for she was about to pass out.

Then, at the very last moment, the pressure on top of her lifted suddenly, and air was able to flow back to her lungs once again. She savored it, treating every breath as if it would be her last. For several moments, she just sat there breathing, regaining her strength before she realized that Flame hadn't just let go of her or something; rather, some*one* was to thank for that.

Winter was in the process of choking Flame from behind, the crimson dragon's eyes wide as he tried to pry his serrated claws off of his throat. It seemed as though Winter was going to end this quickly, until he got elbowed in the stomach and let go, gasping for air as Flame crumpled to the ground. Winter recovered first. He pounced on top of the SkyWing, relentlessly punching and scratching him up, even biting him a couple times. Moon could only watch in disbelief.

Several of the spectating dragons around them began chanting "Fight, fight, fight, fight!" like they couldn't see what was already happening. Starflight was trying to calm them down, but him not being a very loud dragon meant it had no effect.

Flame managed to throw Winter off, the pale blue, enraged dragon landing forcefully against a wall. The impact knocked a quote board from the ceiling, and it came down on top of his head. Luckily he didn't pass out, but he was clearly dazed for a moment before he

got back up. Flame was trying to make a hasty escape, but the students refused to let this happen as they pushed him back when he tried to go through them.

Winter took control of the fight once again, grabbing Flame by the back of his neck and dragging him over to a wall.

"Don't you *ever* lay another claw on her again," he snapped, loud enough for Moon to hear it from where she was. Then, he slammed Flame's skull into the wall, and the fight was over as soon as it had started.

There was no cheering. No applause. Everyone who'd been watching simply left once Flame was knocked out, and Moon was upset that none of them had done anything besides the select few. Then again, what more could she expect? Starflight was the only one who stuck around, apart from Winter.

"I'm assuming Flame lost?" he asked quietly, still shaken by it all.

Moon nodded, then realized how much of an idiot she was before she confirmed it.

"Fatespeaker is okay...right?"

"Yeah, just knocked out, is all," she assured him. "Winter, could you try and get her to the infirmary?"

The IceWing seemed unsure. "What about-"

"I'll be okay getting to our cave," she said. "If anything happens, one of our friends can help."

He gave a curt nod. "I'm not gonna bother taking him," he said with a flap of a wing towards Flame. "He'll wake up eventually; he shouldn't be much more screwed up in the head than he was to begin with."

Winter attempted to lift Fatespeaker on his own, but buckled beneath her weight after a few seconds. "Hey, Starflight? I'm gonna need some help here."

Moon made her way back to her cave as they worked out a way to carry her, hoping none of her friends would notice her wounds.

That hope lasted longer than she'd thought; almost fifteen minutes passed once she arrived before Kinkajou spotted her bleeding cuts.

"Ohmygosh, what happened?!" the tiny RainWing exclaimed, quickly drawing the rest of the winglet to her cave. "It was Flame again, wasn't it?"

Moon nodded sadly. "He jumped me in the halls again. He was planning on killing me, and he would've, if-"

"If Winter hadn't assumed the role of Prince Charming to save the day?" Qibli finished with a roll of his eyes. "You know, *I* would've helped, if I had known!"

"I know, Qibli."

"I'd watch your tongue if I were you," Karma advised. "He doesn't seem like the type you want to cross."

There was a quick flash of some almost-hidden thought in the hybrid's head, but Moon recognized it almost instantly. Karma had a crush on Winter, and a big one at that. She did a good job of hiding it, as Moon wouldn't have been able to tell without hearing it in her mind.

Then, she could've sworn she detected that same sort of feeling deep within herself.

No...I don't like him! Not like Karma must. Do I? Maybe I do, but how can I be sure? It's only been a couple of months that we've all known each other; is that long enough for me to know, or too soon? I think I would know for sure if it had been a long enough time.

Kinkajou and Sparrow started to rush to her side, but she stopped them, insisting she would be alright until Winter came back. She knew he'd gotten some sort of medical supplies, probably bandages; nobody could be dumb enough to go to the nurse's office and not get anything when they had an injured friend.

"Hey guys?" Qibli asked them and Karma. "Could you leave for a minute? There's something I need to talk about with Moon. As long as it's okay with you?" he said, turning his gaze to where she sat on Winter's freezing ledge.

She had a feeling that she knew what this was about, but she agreed anyway.

Karma, Kinkajou, and Sparrow each gave them questioning looks, but did as the SandWing asked and left them alone. Qibli came in and sat next to her, but not uncomfortably close.

"I'm guessing you've figured out by now that I like you," he said, getting straight to his point.

Moon nodded, not expecting him to just flat-out say it. "Yeah...look, Qibli, you're really nice and all, but-"

"I'm not your type," he said, practically taking the words right out of her head. "Or you don't feel the same. Both of which I was expecting." He grinned, but it seemed uneasy. "I just felt like I needed to get that off my chest, because I think I like somebody else. I'm not gonna say *who*, but I wanted you to know so you didn't worry about it."

"Wait," she said, "this isn't some sort of reverse-psychology thing, is it? Where you admit this to me to make you seem like a better dragon and then you use that to try and get me to like you?"

Qibli laughed. "You're way too smart for me to try that. But, I *did* want to talk about Winter..."

"I know that you and him got into a little scuffle in your cave over me," she told him, in case he didn't think she did. "I overheard it on the second day of school."

That did seem to catch him by surprise. "Oh. Well, then I guess it'd be an appropriate time for me to say we've had more little fights like that, previously. The most recent one was on Sunday, but now that I like somebody else, I mainly started it to try and discourage him from liking you. I know that makes me sound horrible, but

Moon...I just don't think he's right for you, if you were thinking about anything like that. I know he's pretty nice to you, and he's charming, and sarcastic and all that, but I've seen his angry side. I don't want him to ever hurt you because of his anger."

That stirred up a swirl of emotions inside her. Embarrassment, disbelief, even a little anger.

"Qibli, we've all seen his bad side. If it ever gets to a point where I feel threatened by him, I'll do something about it. But I don't even know if I like him like that, and he probably doesn't like me in that way, either," she told him. "I'm glad you're worried, but I think I can work everything out on my own, for now."

The sand-colored dragon nodded, not appearing to be hurt or offended by what she said, which was a relief. "Alright. Just wanted to make sure it was on your mind, at least. Just in case. I'll go now, but thanks for being so understanding with all this."

"Bye, Qibli," Moon said, before he left the cave. She wasn't all too happy to hear that he had been picking fights with Winter, but as long as things between the two males quieted down, it didn't bother her too much.

As time went on, her cuts began to hurt worse, especially the one on her face. The one on her shoulder still hurt a ton, but not as much as that one. Still, she was thankful when Winter finally showed up with a roll of bandages held in one talon.

"Sorry that took so long," he apologized. "It proved to be pretty difficult telling Starflight where to go."

"It's okay," Moon replied, simply glad he was here. Without thinking, she stood up and hugged him for a few moments. "I don't know how I'll ever be able to repay you for helping me."

"That's easy; you don't," he said, returning the embrace. She loved the feeling of his cold wings enveloping her, even when it wasn't blazing hot like it had been a few days ago.

"You should go get those cuts washed out," Winter said. "I'm

coming with you, of course. It'll be a cold day in hell before I let Flame hurt you again."

❄Chapter 14: Truth or Dare?❄

Bruh I'm kinda choking right now with ideas. I have a lot, but I'm having difficulty figuring out how to string them all together. There's gonna be a truth or dare in this chapter, but don't expect it to be a regular thing. I *might* create some sort of spinoff, but only if you guys really like it and are willing to contribute truths and dares, but I feel like that's super unoriginal, so idk. Probably not.

Winter sat at the edge of the underground lake, his spiked tail curled around his legs as he surveyed the scene before him. He wasn't paying too close of attention to Moon as she washed out the injuries she'd sustained, worried that he might seem like a creep if he stared. He kept an eye on her in his peripheral vision though. She told him he was being paranoid, but he wasn't going to take any chances; he wasn't sure why, but somehow, he knew he had to protect her no matter what, and if that meant constantly watching for danger, so be it.

What would everyone back home think? About me being protective of a NightWing? They'd hate my guts for all eternity for sure. I wonder what Hailstorm would say if he was still around...NO! He's NOT dead! I know he's out there somewhere...maybe living with the SkyWings, but if he had the choice, he would've returned to the Ice Kingdom long ago. Right?

His mind was drawn away from that subject as he noticed a blue and pink SeaWing swimming over to where Moon was rinsing out

her wounds. They were both roughly the same size, but Winter saw the nervous look in her eyes as she approached. It seemed she felt threatened by her. He stayed where he was, several meters away from them, but looked on.

"Move it, NightWing!" the SeaWing said, fixing Moon with an intense glare. Winter knew he could still flash a scowl that could practically cut diamond. "I thought we agreed that I get the warm spot."

Moon seemed unsure for a moment, but a look of defiance crossed her face and she firmly shook her head, not breaking eye contact with her. Winter was able to conclude from the excessive amount of jewelry the SeaWing wore, as well as her snarky attitude, that she must've been a princess or something; he new the type all too well. What stumped him was why Moon wasn't talking.

"No?" The gray-blue dragon seemed a little surprised. "You do remember that I'm a *princess*, right? I could tell my mother how insubordinate you're being, and she would put a stop to it. I *always* get what I want, so move!"

It struck Winter that he'd behaved this way for so long until he'd arrived at this academy. Had he really always been so greedy and selfish, so belittling?

The SeaWing - who he presumed was Princess Anemone - suddenly looked over at him. "What're *you* looking at?" she snarled.

Winter stood up and walked over to where this was all taking place, trying to keep a calm expression and level head as he spoke. "Nothing much. Just an over-privileged, bratty princess who doesn't deserve her status, nor the jewelry she's wearing. How about you? What are *you* doing, Anemone?"

The princess's face was a mix of anger, confusion, and guilt. "How do you know my name?" she questioned, her voice faltering a little.

"I didn't at first," he replied, "but based on your reputation for being a total snob and the way you were treating my friend here, I pieced it all together. You don't know *me*, do you?"

Anemone just stared at him for a moment. "Are you the IceWing that's been getting into fights with Flame all the time?"

"Yep. But you knew Flame, the SkyWing known for picking fights with pretty much everyone. Yet you don't even know my name, and I've been a bit of a topic around here for awhile now."

"What's your point?" the SeaWing asked, her anger returning.

"My point is that it's easy to be well-known for a bad reputation. That's why so many dragons know *you*; they're told about the way you act, and the way you treat your 'friends', and that's what makes them remember you. They remember you because they know to stay away from you. Or at least the sensible ones," he added, gesturing with a sweep of his wing to the three other SeaWings clearly taking her side on this. "You might be popular, but many of the dragons who hang out with you only do so because you're royalty, and they want a piece of your fame. If you want some *actual* friends, I advise you to quit being so stubborn and belittling. Then maybe they'll like you for who you are, and not where you come from."

Winter held back a smile as Anemone treaded water with her mouth agape, staring at him in disbelief. "You know what? Nobody talks to me like that!" She'd completely forgotten about Moon at this point, which was what he'd hoped would be the end result to this conversation. The SeaWing scrambled out of the water and ran at him as if she were going to tackle him. It was amusing, really.

He sidestepped her and stepped down on her tail hard enough to prevent her from going any further.

"Well, I believe I just did," he said as Anemone tried to turn around and strike him, which she was unable to do. "C'mon Moon, lets go," he called, tossing the roll of bandages in her direction as he released the SeaWing, who fell forward clumsily and ended up flat on her face. "My name's Winter. Hopefully you'll learn something from this."

Then he left the underground lake, Moon trailing him as he did so.

Winter didn't hear from Moon for over an hour after that; apparently Flame had cracked her jaw during the brawl in the hall - **RHYMING, YES -**, which only fueled his already burning hatred for him. In science everyone worked independently, and they had a quiz in history, so they didn't get a chance to speak until after history.

He was making his way to math class when she caught him by the arm, practically making him jump out of his scales.

"Don't do that!" he said, not even joking. "Before you speak, spare yourself the pain; I'm guessing you were gonna say something along the lines of 'Thanks for the help back there, I appreciate it, Anemone got what she deserves' blah blah blah."

Moon just smiled. "Looks like you know me too well," she said, wincing a bit.

Winter turned and began walking again. "Well, you can be a little predictable."

"Excuse me?" she said, stepping in front of him. "I can be the exact opposite of predictable."

He cracked a grin. "Like how?"

"Like this," she responded, before kissing him lightly on the cheek. "And I didn't just do that to prove my point," the NightWing finished, winking at him as she walked off to class.

Winter felt his face burning, his ears surely deep blue. An unfamiliar IceWing made a gagging sound to his left, to which he responded to by baring his teeth in what he hoped was a menacing snarl. They didn't appear put off at all, simply rolling their eyes at him and walking away.

Instead of wasting time standing there like a statue, he quickly and literally followed in Moon's footsteps as he hurried to his next class as well. Although being on time was a big concern for him most of the time, it hardly compared to how much space in his mind was

being filled by what had just happened.

This part is gonna be kinda quick, but it's very important.

Winter waited impatiently as Tamarin built up to what she was trying to tell him and Moon. It was just after art class and she'd pulled them aside in the hall, insisting she had something very important to discuss.

"So..." the blind RainWing said, shaking nervously. "You know how, about a month and a half ago, Flame somehow found out that you, Moon, told Winter what he'd threatened to do to you if you talked about what he was doing?"

Tamarin's point immediately clicked in his head. He knew Flame couldn't have just miraculously found out about that, when Moon had only told him what went down.

"You told him?!" Winter and Moon both practically shouted.

The RainWing instantly flinched away. "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean for things to get this bad...both of you have gotten hurt in all of this, and now Flame's expelled, and-"

"Well maybe you should've thought of that before you went and told him!" the pale blue dragon said. "Do you know how much trouble you've caused?! He'll probably try to kill the both of us the next time we run into him because of you!"

Moon jabbed him sharply in the side with a claw, drawing a bit of blood. "Winter, stop," she said forcefully. She pointed to Tamarin, and Winter immediately hated himself when he saw that she was crying.

Yes, blind people/dragons can cry.

Winter wanted to apologize, but he feared anything that came out of his mouth would sound vile and angry, as he was still frustrated to hear this news, so his held his tongue.

"I love him, okay?" Tamarin replied, her clouded eyes glazed with fresh tears. "I know he doesn't deserve it, and I know I really shouldn't care about him at all, but I do! I know there's a good side to Flame, and I just thought...that maybe he would like me more, if...if I told him that you told someone," she said to Moon. "I'm so sorry; hate me if you want, but just know that I never wanted any of this to happen, okay?"

Way to go, me. You're officially a horrible dragon, as if you weren't bad enough already.

Moon shot a concerned glance his way, but she quickly masked it with anger. "See what you did?" she asked him. "I think it would be best for all of us if you go get yourself under control, Winter."

That hit hard. Winter felt a pang of...something, in his chest, like he'd been smacked in the torso with a large rock. He nearly yelled at her, but realized that it would only make him seem even more immature. Plus, he'd already made one girl cry; he couldn't stand to do that to another.

Moon just glared at him, neither of them pulling their eyes away. Usually this happened in awkward scenarios, but right now the feeling of anger was mutual between them. Rather than refusing to leave, or doing something else to only make things worse, for once, Winter backed down. He flew away, and he didn't care where it got him, as long as it was far, far away from Moon. Not because of what she'd said to him, but because he was afraid of what he might've done to her in response if he'd waited any longer.

"Dare," Qibli said in response to Winter's question. "I'm no female dog!"

Get it? If you do, you're an intellectual. If not, you've lived too much of a sheltered life, my friend.

It was the end of the day and the Jade Winglet was sitting at the edge of the underground lake. They'd all gotten bored, having

finished their studying and homework, and then Turtle had proposed a game of truth or dare. It seemed odd for someone so reserved, however they'd each accepted, even Carnelian. Right now Winter was the only one swimming, as the water was bitterly cold for everyone else in the dying light of the evening.

He thought back to that morning, when Moon had kissed him, and decided he shouldn't be the only one to feel that kind of embarrassment. Although it had felt nice, the publicity of it had been horrible. Now though, she was barely speaking to him, and he was doing the same to her.

"Alright then," he said, casually letting the current of the lake slowly drift him across the water. "I dare you to kiss your crush. I don't care if it's on the mouth or not, but whoever it is, you have to do it. If it's somebody not in this cave, you have to go find them and bring someone along to prove that you went through with it."

"Oooh," went Sparrow. "Looks like Qibli's about to do my job for me!"

Meanwhile, the SandWing was blushing furiously. "I haven't even agreed yet! Turning back to Winter, he asked "What's the punishment if I don't?"

"You have to shout 'Tsunami picks her nose!' in the hallway while she's there and there are several other dragons around," Winter said with a snicker.

"Ouch," Carnelian said. "Looks like this won't end well for you either way."

"Is that true?" Karma asked, a look of mild disgust on her face.

"I hope not, for Qibli's sake," Moon replied.

Qibli considered the stakes. "I suppose humiliation is better than having every bone in my body broken...alright, I accept..."

The pale yellow dragon shuffled his way over to where Moon was sitting, who seemed alarmed at this. Winter did too, and would've flown off the rails had Qibli not jerked himself in a different

direction at the last moment and kissed someone who he knew none of them had been expecting, especially not the dragon on the receiving end...

Carnelian.

The SkyWing's yellow eyes widened in shock as Qibli pressed his mouth to hers, but she seemed to enjoy it after a few seconds, as she closed them and kissed him back. After that Winter - and everyone else - didn't see anything, as they all covered their eyes.

After a good fifteen seconds, Winter interrupted them.

"I said kiss, not make out," he said, still shielding his eyes with a wing. "Wrap it up."

Thankfully for the sake of everyone besides Qibli and Carnelian, they quickly stopped, both of them burning bright red in the face. The SandWing went back to where he'd previously been sitting, between Turtle and Sparrow, but surprisingly, Carnelian followed him and sat down next to him.

Qibli wasted no time in asking Winter truth or dare. The IceWing knew he would probably ask him something like, who do you have a crush on, or something like that, and he wouldn't be able to back out of a truth. At least if he chose dare he could take the punishment.

"Dare."

Qibli grinned mischievously. "I dare you to admit to all of us who you have a crush on."

"I can't see this ending well for anybody," Turtle said. "After this, let's stop with all the who you have a crush on dares and truths."

"Agreed," Moon said.

Winter hadn't known if he'd liked anybody here in that way until this morning, but now he knew the best candidate by far was her. And he would NEVER admit who he liked to them, even if it wasn't her.

"What's the punishment?"

Qibli couldn't think of one after pondering it for awhile. Then, Kinkajou gave him an idea that was only slightly worse than admitting who his crush was.

"We get to paint all your spikes and claws pink, and you have to keep them that way for a week!" the RainWing said excitedly.

The SandWing grinned. "That's better than my idea; I was just going to say he had to kill himself."

A lot of you have been asking when this sort of topic would come up. Well, here it is! Not sure how out-of-the-blue this will seem, but to be honest, I don't care right now. I'll tell you why at the end of the chapter, and I promise no more of these interjections mid-chapter, or very minimal ones at least!

Everyone fell silent. It was so quiet that Winter could hear the gentle ripple of the water as he floated, but he could hardly focus on that now.

"That's not okay, Qibli," Kinkajou whispered, loud enough for Winter to pick up. He just watched as Qibli replied, emotions not even registering in his head. It was like he'd...crashed, or something, and he knew it. He felt...blank. Empty.

The SandWing awkwardly chuckled. "I was just kidding," he said. "C'mon, you all know I'm just joking, right?" His black eyes flitted from stunned face to stunned face, his own expression falling more and more as he did so.

"Why would you even joke about that?" Karma asked.

Qibli was silent, his face pale.

"What if he *has* thought about that before?" Moon questioned him. "You'd only be making him feel worse."

"I have," Winter said, finally speaking. He didn't look at any of them, just continued to float like an orca carcass at sea. "I've thought about it before. Multiple times a week, actually. That is, I

did. Before I met you all."

"I didn't mean to-" Qibli started to say.

"SHUT UP!" Winter roared, not floating anymore, instead swimming over to the edge of the lake. "Just shut your mouth for once, will you?" He said it as more of an order than a question, staring the SandWing right in the eyes. "You think I'm kidding? Well, I'm not; you have *no clue* how hard things can be at home for me. I know you had it bad and all, having to scrounge around for food in the Scorpion Den, but try and imagine doing the best you possibly can to live up to your tribe's legacy and your parents' expectations for FOUR STRAIGHT YEARS only to have everyone say 'You could've done this better,' or 'You're an IceWing, act like it,' or 'Why can't you be more like your brother, Winter, the brother YOU CAUSED THE DEATH OF BECAUSE YOU LET HIM GET CAPTURED IN THE WOODS'!" He felt tears welling up in his eyes and wiped them away. "You see what being an IceWing does to you? It hardens you, breaks you down bit by bit until you feel nothing other than anger and despair and longing for your own kind to just...be okay with you, to not constantly be seeking improvement day after day, week after week, month after month...so don't you *ever* joke about something like that ever again, Qibli."

Winter was a mess, and he knew it. His friends knew it now, too. He climbed up onto the rocks and shook the water from himself, storming toward the exit to the cavern. He needed to be away from all this, and while he blamed it on others, he knew the main problem was him. And you can never escape yourself, no matter how fast you fly.

"Winter, wait!" Moon shouted. He turned around to meet her eyes, seeing that she was near the brink of tears as well. "Please, don't leave...we had no idea that any of this was going on."

He didn't sigh, didn't yell, didn't storm away in a flurry of rage. Instead, he spoke soft enough so hopefully only she could hear him.

"No, you didn't. Nobody ever knows."

Then, ignoring her pleading, he turned and left, and when Moon

tried to follow him, he ran and ran and ran until he didn't even know where he was anymore.

Mhm. Hope you guys liked this chapter, and I'm extremely sorry that I didn't get it out sooner; there are two main reasons why this happened. The first was my bad; I slacked off on writing and was unable to think of any ideas for a few days, so that's my bad. Then, I tried to log in yesterday, only to find that I was locked out of my account. Wattpad was having issues, as I KNOW I put in my correct password, but it claimed it wasn't correct. I tried to reset my password, but the email linked to my account is outdated and I can't access it. So, I could not log in. Tried contacting Wattpad, they replied with a bunch of useless junk I'd already tried. So, I was very worried I would have to start a new account and somehow let you all know about it, then I would have to rewrite all my stories, and it would've been a disaster. Not gonna lie, I cried a bit. Judge me if you want, I don't give two turds. Now I'm going to go change the email linked to my account in case this ever happens again. I hope you had a great day, and thanks for stopping by. Peace.

❄Chapter 15: An Invite●

[image]

I know when I do chapters with mixed POVs, it often ends up going in the order of Winter's before Moon's and while I try to balance it out, a lot of the time the events taking place wouldn't make sense if Moon's POV was before his, because I would have to change the order. So I'm sorry if this annoys you, but it's just the way it is. (Also I'm on my laptop right now, and I'm not gonna lie, the emojis look better on here than on my iPad where I normally write!)

Today had proven to be a strange one. Winter had noticed that many of the usually obnoxious students here at the academy were strangely quiet. That never happened, and his confusion only deepened when he realized Qibli was pretty quiet as well. It seemed nearly everyone was in deep thought about something or other, and to be honest, it was sort of eerie. Even Moon was hardly speaking to him, but that was likely because of the previous day's events with him running out on all of them and his meltdown in the underground lake. Still, his other friends - he was still mildly miffed at himself for automatically referring to them like that - would be chatty, even if it wasn't with him.

And now, Argo had called a surprise Midnight Marauders meeting in the *library* of all places. They couldn't do any fighting here! While this seemed to perplex not only him, but the other three dragons - Bigtail wasn't present for whatever reason- as well. Nobody dared question the SkyWing though, as Pronghorn had gotten a tooth knocked loose the last time he'd questioned his motives. Thankfully, that mystery was quickly solved.

"I bet you all are wondering why we're in the library today," Argo said to them. They were huddled in a small group by the history

and nonfiction shelves.

"Shhhh!" someone scolded him from several meters away.

"You shhh!" he replied. It didn't seem to occur to him how immature he looked now, as he went back to speaking like it had never happened. "As I was saying, we're here to do some research. What kind of research, you ask? Well, secretive research, and what better place to do it than here? You might even say the knowledge we may find today could be *powerful*."

Winter still had no clue what he was talking about.

Lowering his voice, Argo spoke to the group once more. "Look, I've been doing a little research myself, research that has spanned nearly a year. I haven't been super focused on it, just sort of doing this in my spare time, but I've found out about some pretty *awesome* stuff. That is, if any of it is true. You see, hundreds, maybe even thousands of years ago, it was rumored that every dragon tribe had some sort of hidden power, separate from the normal attributes that make all seven of them unique. Powers that set dragons above the standard, as long as they knew how to unlock them. However, this knowledge was lost over time, if it ever existed in the first place. I propose that we should try and find out as much as we possibly can about these hidden powers." Argo was clearly excited to share this news with them all, swaying side to side a little as he spoke. "I've heard this library has some pretty old scrolls, maybe even some from the library at Queen Thorn's palace, and that library has THOUSANDS of ancient facts and stories; if there's anywhere we could find out about these powers, it would be here."

"So you basically want us to try and confirm your research," Icicle said, summing up everything the red SkyWing had said in one short sentence.

"Correct!" Argo almost shouted, receiving several 'Shhhh!'s from nearby dragons. "Now let's get to work! Look in the history and nonfiction sections, especially for the scrolls in the way back. If they're old, dragons will think they're unreliable, which in turn means they will be the most untouched."

Winter wasn't pleased to hear that they had to sort through scrolls, but if it meant potentially unlocking powers long-forgotten for millenniums...he didn't even have to finish that thought.

As he was sorting through the shelves, he could sense someone approaching him from the side. He didn't worry though, for it was his sister.

"I can't believe we're here looking at *scrolls*," she griped. "This group's whole focus is about fighting, and I get that special powers would be exciting and all, but what are the chances they ever existed at all? Probably one in seven billion!"

Winter merely glanced at her before continuing scanning the titles. "Yeah, but at least the potential rewards are pretty great."

"But even if these 'powers' do exist," Icicle said, "and we somehow managed to figure out how to use them ourselves, we would have to keep them secret! What if other dragons tried to experiment on us or something if they found out?"

"I think you're just being paranoid."

She sighed. "Maybe. Have you seen Bigtail anywhere lately? I haven't seen him since this morning, and I'm pretty sure he was there for science class."

Winter shrugged. "He might've skipped class."

"For a whole day?"

Again, he just shrugged. "You're not *worried* about him, are you?" he asked, staring at her. "You know what Mother and Father would do to you if you were..."

I'm being such a hypocrite, aren't I?

Icicle bristled. "Speak for yourself! I've heard about you rescuing that NightWing over and over again...you're not exactly doing a good job of maintaining a low profile here, with all the skirmishes you've been getting into."

"Nobody ever said we had to."

"It was kind of implied."

"Well why don't you take yourself and your implications elsewhere and actually do what we're supposed to be doing?" Winter spat.

"Fine."

She finally left, leaving him to examine the scrolls in peace.

War and Peace...nope. That's a pretty hefty scroll, and probably too advanced for my reading level, I'll admit. Oh boy, another scroll about the War of SandWing Succession...as if I haven't heard about it a million times from my tribe's fuming over not winning that war. Next...what's this?

He slightly withdrew a small scroll from the shelf, unrolling it enough to see the title: A Guide to Love.

Barf. Why is this even in the history section? Actually, some lazy dragon probably forgot where they got it from and just stuck it here. Great.

Despite his immediate reaction to the rolled up sheet of parchment, Winter decided he would hang onto it. Of course, he would leave it here and come back for it later as to not be seen with it; he wasn't an idiot. But maybe it could help him determine what those weird sensations that struck him almost whenever he was around Moon really were.

After twenty more minutes of searching, the only one of them to come up with anything was Pronghorn, who found a scroll that seemed as old as time, the paper yellowed beyond belief and looking like it would crumble to dust at any moment. Argo told them he would read into it later, and they were all dismissed. Before he departed, Winter made sure to snag that scroll from earlier, tucking it underneath a wing as he went back to his cave.

He idly picked at the stitches on his arm on the way, still peeved that they wouldn't be taken out for awhile longer. They didn't hurt much anymore, but frequently itched, and it was starting to get

uncomfortable. He almost missed a poster taped to the wall, but stopped at the last moment, as there weren't often posters or flyers floating around. He skimmed it over, and suddenly realized why everyone had been acting so strange. Apparently he hadn't known until now that there was a school dance coming up on Friday, after all the classes were over. It was going to be held in the Great Hall, which made sense; there would be plenty of room for everyone that way. It said to dress nicely, but dragons didn't normally dress up, and if they did, it was usually in the form of simple accessories, like jewelry or something, and Winter was definitely not going to get any earrings or anything, if he decided to go at all.

Everyone must be thinking about the dance. That makes a lot more sense now. I would go, but what's the point of doing that if I would be going alone? That's like going by yourself to an event where you can bring a friend. That's exactly what this is, actually, and standing alone on the sidelines doesn't seem like much fun. Maybe I won't go.

At the moment, with none of his friends wanting to be around him it seemed, that was most likely the best choice.

Moon's heart practically jumped out of her chest when Winter came back to their sleeping cave. He was holding a small scroll, but she barely noticed it, as she had something important she needed to say to him.

"H-hey, Winter," she greeted him, hearing her voice shake. He must've already suspected something, as she was standing next to her bed and not on it, curled up with a scroll. "How was the meeting?"

"It was fine," he replied. "We just did some sparring, then learned a couple new fighting methods, same old same old." Just by taking a glimpse inside his head, she knew he was lying, but couldn't decipher why, or what they had actually done at the meeting.

"That's good. Hey, uh...you've heard about the dance thing coming up, right?"

"Yep."

The inside of her mouth felt like a desert, it was so dry. Her palms were getting all clammy as well. Why was this making her so nervous?

Oh I don't know, maybe because you're about to ask Winter something so important that it might change his opinion on you...maybe. Hopefully.

"Do... well I, uh..."

Spit it out! His mind fumed, and she couldn't blame him.

"Do you want to go with me?" she forced herself to ask. "To the dance? You're probably not the type to go to a lot of social events like that or anything, and I'm not either, but I thought that...it might be fun. Maybe, if you want to...you don't have to..."

"You planning on running a marathon with that mouth of yours?" he asked, an edge to his tone. Moon thought he would be angry, but when she looked at his face, she was shocked to see a sly grin. "It means stop talking, if you didn't know," he clarified. "I'm in. Normally I wouldn't, but, since it's with you...I guess I'll make an exception."

Moon felt the biggest, silliest, stupidest grin she'd ever worn cross her face, but she didn't care how weird it seemed. She sort-of-ran the few feet between them and wrapped her arms and wings around him in a hug, only the third time she'd done so if she remembered correctly, but it still felt just as delightful as it had the first time when he hugged her back.

She wouldn't have cared if anybody saw them, even if it were Secretkeeper. It didn't matter how stupid, or foolish she looked, because Winter had agreed, and she couldn't have been any happier.

But, as if the universe had read *her* mind and decided to rain on this little parade, Moon did a double take, thinking that she'd seen her mother standing out in the hallway. Surely not, though; her

mother would've told her she was coming for a visit. Right?

Wrong.

Sorry this chapter was so short compared to the rest, but I have no excuse for it this time. :P. Also, DUN DUN DUUUUNNNN! Had to leave you guys on a cliffhanger! If you've been with me awhile, you'll know I love to do that, but I don't do it often, for I know how frustrating it is for you!

● Chapter 16 ●

"What exactly is going on here?" Moon's mother asked, more curiosity than anger in her voice. Moon wasn't sure whether that was good, or she was just trying not to make a scene in front of Winter, a complete stranger to her.

Nonetheless, the small NightWing let go of him like her life depended on it, and though he seemed confused as to why, it seemed he quickly pieced together the clues.

"Oh," Winter said, clicking his tongue. "I think I'm just going to excuse myself...don't want to get stuck in the middle of this..." he continued, clearly directed more toward Moon than her mother. Neither her, nor Secretkeeper, did anything to stop him from leaving the cave, his ears and face sporting a dark blue tone in a blush.

Meanwhile, Moon felt her own face heat up like a hot spring as her mother entered the cave. She was anticipating some sort of questioning, maybe even a reprimand or punishment; Secretkeeper had never been fond of IceWings. Instead, she just sat down on the floor, curling her tail around her talons just like Moon did, motioning for her to sit as well.

Moments of uncomfortable silence washed over them until Moonwatcher finally decided enough was enough, and broke it.

"Hello, Mom," she said quietly, not looking directly at the older dragon. "What are you doing here?"

"Visiting my daughter. Why else would I be here?" Her mother seemed awfully cheerful for someone who'd just seen her own dragonet hug someone from an enemy tribe. Moon knew what was coming and didn't get too comfortable, as this was a tactic Secretkeeper often used when Moon got in trouble. Usually she would avoid the subject for a bit before confronting her about it.

"Didn't you get any of the letters I sent you?"

Moon shook her head. "Nobody ever said anything to me about mail."

Her mother exhaled heavily. "I knew that mail-dragon wasn't to be trusted...probably delivered them to the wrong place, or lost them...never mind that! How have things been? Have you made any friends?"

"Things are pretty good so far," Moon said, blatantly lying to her own mother. Things had been far from good most of the time, with worries about Flame, or Winter, or the secret of her powers, or homework plaguing her the majority of the time she'd been here.

Secretkeeper undoubtedly noticed. "I know that isn't true, honey. What's been going on? Wait - is that a scar on your face?!"

"Well, the past couple months, there have been some issues between me and this SkyWing named Flame. I was out in the halls one day, and I saw him doing something he shouldn't have been, and he threatened me not to tell anyone or he would hurt me, but I did." Moon was rambling on now, and she knew it, but she just couldn't stop the waterfall of words from flowing. "And then somebody overheard me tell them, and they told Flame, and then he gave me these two scars with a knife," she said, pointing to the cuts on her face and shoulder. "And he cracked my jaw too, but that's mostly healed."

"By all the moons, Moon!" her mother said, but with relief in her tone, rather than anger. She wrapped her in a fierce hug, and Moon just felt like she needed to cry. It seemed like she'd held back far too many tears here, and there had never been a shoulder to cry on until now, with Secretkeeper here. Sure, Winter could have been that dragon, but that would've just been weird, even if they had hugged already.

So, Moon cried, gentle sobbing breaking the blanket of silence over them.

"It's alright," Secretkeeper soothed. "Maybe you were right, Moon.

We should've just waited another year..."

"No, it's not that!" Moon said between sobs. "I like it here, mostly. It's just that everything has been so stressful lately, and sometimes I just don't know what to do about it."

"Well, have you made any friends?"

Sure seems like it with her getting all cozy with that IceWing, a bitter side of her mother's brain thought. Moon often couldn't read her mother's mind, as she had developed a way to hide most of her thoughts. Sometimes one slipped through, like now.

Ignoring that rude thought, Moon answered yes, telling Secretkeeper about everyone in her winglet, leaving out the part about Qibli and Winter having some sort of silent war going on, of course.

Moon didn't realize her mother was pulling that trick about when she got in trouble until it was too late; she'd completely forgotten about the fact that she'd been seen with Winter like that, which was probably the whole point of her mother avoiding it until now.

"Do you like that boy?" Secretkeeper asked, a noticeable amount of displeasure in her tone. "The IceWing?"

Moon winced; everything had been going alright up until this point.

"No!" she quickly protested, no longer hugging Secretkeeper. "I'm not sure what to think of him, even with my...'talent'. One minute, he's acting normal and calm, the next, something sets him off and he becomes some raging hurricane of anger, pacing back and forth and muttering to himself, or just storming off."

Her mother raised an eyebrow.

I know dragons don't have hair, but there's not much else for me to call the ridges above their eyes that serve as eyebrows. I swear if anybody starts some sort of correction/what it should be called in the comments, I'm going to report them for the lack of having a life. So don't.

"Are you sure? You seem awfully close with him from what I saw," her mother replied, almost in the form of a growl.

Silence fell over them, but Moon refused to break her gaze. She was tired of backing down, letting others intimidate her, even if it was her own parent.

"Yes, mother, I'm sure," she replied firmly. "But let's say, hypothetically, I did like him. Why, exactly would that be a huge deal?"

"You do like him!" Secretkeeper accused, standing up and flaring her wings.

"I said *hypothetically*!" Moon said, standing up and trying her best to seem tall. Even so, she still fell at least three inches short compared to the older dragon.

Her mother sighed, rubbing her temples and closing her eyes for a few moments. "Moon, NightWings and IceWings have been enemies as long as anyone can remember, and there's nothing we can do about that. I'm not quite sure why, and frankly I think it's all a stupid mess, but that's just the way things are. I don't want you getting hurt because someone suspected you had feelings for one of them."

"So there's a *them* now?" Moon asked, starting to get riled up herself. "You know, I think if you just got to know Winter, you'd change your mind. He's not *like* the rest of his tribe, Mom! I know it might seem like they're all the same, just icy, cold-hearted dragons who only care about themselves, but he's different, and he sort of told us why most IceWings act like that. He said something about their tribe having insane, horrible expectations that they all have to be perfect and superior, and it pretty much just breaks them. It turns them from innocent, happy little dragonets, to stone-faced, unfriendly jerks! Don't you see? It's not their fault!"

Secretkeeper's irritated expression fell to one of pity, maybe even guilt. Moon's heart soared when she thought that maybe she'd gotten through to her. And then it all came crashing down as that angered face returned.

"I don't want you hanging out with that IceWing anymore, Moonwatcher. It's too great a risk."

Moon crumbled on the inside, all her hopes that her mother might change her ideals on IceWings dashed.

"I should be going," Secretkeeper said, turning to leave.

"No, Mom, wait!" Moon pleaded. "Can't you stay a little longer? Please? I've missed you so much, I don't want you to leave just like that..."

Something in her mother's face faltered for a second, but quickly went back to the way it was before. Disappointed. Angry. Let down.

"It seems you've been doing just fine without me; I think you can manage."

There was nothing Moon could do to stop her from departing without causing a scene, something she'd been getting into far too much lately. So, she just sighed and flopped down on her leaf bed like a sack of depressed potatoes. She sat there for a good couple of minutes, wondering why things always had to be like this, with her mother leaving every time things were starting to go well. At least, that conversation had been going well up until she asked Moon if she liked Winter.

Let's be honest, Moon; you do like him. Even if he can turn into some flurry of rage at the slightest thing, or how he's so unpredictable, worried about his reputation, yet not caring about it at all at the same time. He's a talonful, that's for sure, but for whatever reason, you just can't stay away from him.

Her sorrow-filled eyes drifted to the small scroll the IceWing had left behind, and he couldn't help but wonder what knowledge such a small roll of paper could hold. She checked to make sure he wasn't coming back, stepping out into the main hallway, and then went over to his ice-cold ledge and unrolled it just enough to read the title.

A Guide to Love? Why would he have this? Did he take the wrong

scroll by mistake?

She decided not to read it, placing it back where it had been before. Instead, she grabbed one of her own scrolls, lying down on Winter's ledge, the cold temperature nearly enough to drive her away from it, yet something about it keeping her there. Just like him.

(The next morning...(read that in the voice of the Spongebob narrator))

"Please, Moon?" Kinkajou begged, staring up at her with sad eyes. "I haven't been able to find it anywhere! Will you pleeeaaase come with me? I can get you something too, if you want."

Kinkajou had been pestering her for the past ten minutes to come with her to some market going on at a small town near the academy. Apparently there was some bracelet the RainWing really wanted, and she was asking Moon to come with her to see if it was there. The reason she even wanted it was probably because of the dance coming up tomorrow. The staff had let everyone take the day off to prepare, and nobody wanted to miss this opportunity.

Forgive me if I have the days mixed up, but all you need to know is that it is now Thursday, the day before the dance.

"Alright, fine." Moon said, growing exhausted mentally just from this conversation. She didn't feel like getting into a debate over something this early in the day. It wasn't even close to noon yet. "I need to get something to wear as well, so sure, I'll go."

Kinkajou beamed. "Thank you sooooo much! I'm going with Turtle tomorrow to the dance! Well, he didn't exactly agree, but I think it's kind of implied that we're still going together. Isn't he so cute? Also, you don't really need any jewelry; those silver scales by your eyes are pretty sparkly already!

Moon smiled. "Thanks, but the flyers did say you need to dress up a little. Maybe I'll get some earrings or something, but I'm not going

to overdo it."

"Oooooh! Sounds like someone has a secret date for the dance!" Kinkajou said, nudging her in the side with a pinkish-yellow wing. "Who is it? Tell me tell me tell me!"

"Kink..." Moon sighed, knowing the small dragon would not stop until she got an answer. And telling the truth was probably better than lying. "It's Winter, okay? I asked him yesterday, and he said yes."

"I knew it!" Kinkajou squealed, jumping up and down, her scales an eye-assaulting shade of pink. "That's kind of poetic, an IceWing and a NightWing in love!"

"We are not in love, Kinkajou!" Moon called as the small RainWing went bounding out of the cave probably to tell Sparrow. The two of them were pretty good friends now.

Poetic, huh? Does a creepy, ominous prophecy count as poetry? How did it go again? It was something about NightWings going missing, then two IceWings, and blue smoke...I do remember somebody talking about Bigtail not being seen for a day or two...oh no. If it is a prophecy...it seems like it's already coming true! What if more NightWings start disappearing? Should I tell someone? I can't tell any of the staff; they won't believe me, having actually experienced being tricked and lied to with a fake prophecy before.

For some reason, her mind flicked back to when Tamarin had admitted she loved Flame. It seemed wrong, even to Moon, to love someone so cruel, but she obviously saw some good in him. She remembered the pained look on the blind RainWing's face, and knew she had to find some way to get Flame to go to the dance with her. Maybe she could ask someone in charge about that. Then she would seem like a good dragon, then maybe they would believe her if she told them about her powers...

What am I thinking?! I can't tell ANYONE about them! They probably won't even believe me, and if they did, they'd hate me forever...I can't lose all these friends I've made. They actually like me, and I like them. They're really all I have here, besides myself, and maybe Starflight. I still

need to see if I can't work something out to get Flame and Tamarin together tonight...am I turning into Sparrow? Sparrow! I should ask her! She knows all about this kind of thing...I bet if she tried to convince somebody important to let Flame back into the school for an hour or so tonight, they would let him!

That rushed string of thought barely finished before the matchmaker herself sauntered into the sleeping cave, a wide grin plastered on her face. Kinkajou was trailing her, making it clear she'd told.

"So you're going to the dance with ColdClaws tonight?" Sparrow asked, using a random nickname she'd given Winter a couple weeks ago. "I had a feeling this would happen! We have to make everything perfect! First things first, you're gonna need something sparkly-"

"No!" Moon interrupted. "Forget about that; I'm going with Kinkajou to pick something out anyway. What we really need to focus on is convincing Clay, or Tsunami, or somebody to let Flame go to the dance with Tamarin. She told me that she likes him, and I know that sounds horrible, with him being so mean, but she believes there's good in him somewhere. We have to give them a chance, Sparrow, and you're the best dragon I know to handle this. Could you, maybe, try and work something out? I know it's probably just an extra hassle for you, but I want Tamarin to be happy."

Sparrow beamed. "Of course! I live for love, Moon. You should know that by now!" Then, she was off, a red blur as she hurried down the hallway.

Moon sighed. "I hope she can persuade them. For Tamarin's sake, more than anything," she said aloud, although in retrospect, she probably didn't need to.

"C'mon Moon, let's go! That bracelet isn't going to come to me, and neither are your earrings!" Kinkajou, said, tugging her along as she left the cave again.

Today was going to be one of those days. Moon could just tell.

The crowd turned out to be busier than they'd expected. It seemed other students from the academy had heard about this place, and were searching for a little bling for themselves. Fortunately, many of the vendors were selling accessories, so it wasn't like there was one spot everybody wanted to be in.

"Where should we start?" Kinkajou asked, her excitement obvious. "Everything looks so clean, and shiny, and sparkly..."

Moon found some of the jewelry to be *too* glamorous, with the crystal-clear sky shining above the small, grassy valley this market was being held in. She reached into her bag to make sure her money was still in there, and came across a familiar, round object while doing so. It was the egg, from the egg project a couple weeks ago. Somehow, she and a Winter had managed to not let a single thing happen to it, and had received full points. She hadn't remembered keeping it, but put it back inside the satchel anyway.

"Just look for something that catches your eye. You can change the color of your scales, so it really doesn't matter what you get as long as you like it," Moon told her.

"That's really smart! Okay, something eye-catching..." she replied, her head turning as she skimmed over the nearest selling tables. "Ooh! I see something! Or rather, some*one*...a certain someone who may, just possibly, might be going to the dance with you tonight."

Moon was thoroughly surprised at her observation. "Winter?! What's he doing here?"

"Probably the same thing as us," Kinkajou said, her eyes fixated on him in the distance. Moon could tell it was him, even though she couldn't see him very clearly through the groups of other dragons. He was talking to a SandWing at a small table covered with a black cloth.

That's a smart business choice. That'll make the items stand out even more.

"Can you see what he's doing?" Kinkajou asked. "I'm not very tall, and I can't fly up to see without seeming suspicious."

"Well, you'll have to take what you can get, Kinkajou. I'm pretty small, too." Moon explained, although she still tried her best to see. "Hm...it looks like he's checking out some sort of wristband, kind of like Turtle's in terms of size and shape. Now, he's looking at a necklace, I think. It's silver, but I can't tell what it looks like other than that. Oh, wait - two necklaces!"

"Seems like he might be buying something special for you!" Kinkajou commented. "Or maybe for both of you!"

Moon didn't respond, hoping Winter couldn't see them. He held on to all three items, then spilled some coins from a pouch he was carrying onto the table. The SandWing counted them all, then smiled and said something to him, before Winter left.

"He just bought all three things," Moon reported. "He's going to another table now...it's closer than the one before. It looks like the dragon there is selling ties."

"Neck ties, or bow ties?"

"Both." The NightWing watched as he examined several. She grinned when he looked at one of them on himself in a mirror, then made a face of disgust and immediately took it off, setting it back on the counter. After a few minutes, he seemed to settle on a navy blue one with white stripes. Then, he got into some sort of argument with the dragon running the stand, a SkyWing, probably over the price. Eventually, they settled on something, Winter paid, and then started to leave. Not before he looked right at Moon, though, practically scaring her out of her scales. Amid the thundering sound of her beating heart, she could faintly hear a string of thoughts from him.

Thought I wouldn't notice her here, huh? Hm...I guess she does look sort of cute when she gets startled.

Then, he turned around and flew off, leaving Moon a confused mess.

He...thinks I'm cute? Maybe this will work out, after all...

❄Chapter 17: Is This Happening?❄

[image]

I love the above image. They're both so confused, and it's adorable! Also, looks like the artist didn't quite align their eyes so that they're looking at the other's eyes, because Winter appears to be staring at her nose, XD.

Winter stood, waiting impatiently by the punch bowl in Jade Mountain Academy's Great Hall. He was growing annoyed and nervous at once; the dance had started fifteen minutes ago and Moon hadn't shown yet. He fidgeted with the navy blue and white-striped bow tie around his neck, the fabric irritating the sensitive scales. Maybe it was just his nerves.

Is she mad that I didn't ask her instead of the other way around? Then again, I probably wouldn't have been able to bring myself to, even though I guess I did want this. Why else would I be here?

The pale blue IceWing looked over across the space, where he could see Blizzard - still relatively new here - trying to work up the guts to talk to Sparrow. The dark blue dragon had spilled the fact that he liked her to Winter about four days ago, which puzzled him, as Blizzard had only been here a couple weeks. How could he know he liked someone that quickly? It had taken Winter two months to figure out that he...

Liked Moon. As more than a friend.

He still despised himself every now and then for letting those feelings blossom into what they were now, a desperate desire to be something more with the pretty NightWing, even if he rarely consciously admitted it to himself. He hoped to the love of everything that she didn't know that he felt this way.

He'd pretty much figured out by now what those weird feelings he always got when he was around her were: he was in love. Badly. He'd confirmed it after reading that scroll he'd gotten two days ago.

Winter turned and filled a glass with some fruit punch to take his mind off of things. He'd never been a huge fan of sugary things, since he'd never had any real fruit before, but everybody knew the flavoring in this drink was artificial and loaded with sugar. Besides, he was feeling a little tired despite his anxiety, and could use a pick-me-up.

The lighting here was dark, the only fire globes lit being dark blue ones that made the grand cavern seem like it was midnight. Blue and silver ribbons and streamers strung from stalactites and stalagmites added to this, and there a few dragons Winter barely recognized playing instruments including a harp, a musical triangle, and possibly some sort of wind chime to create very calming sounds, almost sounding nature-like.

Winter drank down his glass of punch quickly, then nearly choked on it when he noticed Flame at the other end of the cavern, standing next to Tamarin. What was he doing here? He'd been expelled earlier that week, and should've been long before that!

The IceWing saved himself from a possible bout of choking, only to actually start choking as he saw Moonwatcher enter the Great Hall through the single entrance cave on the far left wall. A purplish-blue SeaWing approached him, wearing a worried expression, but he held up a talon as he cleared his throat of the sugary drink.

"I'm good," he croaked as soon as he was once more able to speak. They just nodded and walked away, and Winter decided to avoid

the punch for a bit, at least until it seemed all the surprises were over.

Pull yourself together! You're an IceWing, for Pyrrhia's sake! Now go over there and talk to her, before she catches you gawking like a half-wit!

Winter didn't ignore his own command. He took a couple deep breaths until the shaking in his arms stopped, then walked over to where Moon was looking around, either admiring the decorations or looking for him. She saw him coming and flashed a genuine smile, her off-white teeth showing and everything.

Moons, she looks gorgeous in this light, Winter thought before he could stop himself.

"Hey," he greeted her, stopping only about two feet away from her.

Hey??? What about something more...thought-out?

"Hi, Winter. I'm so sorry I'm late! Kinkajou spent *hours* trying to find 'the perfect accessory' and trying to figure out what her color scheme would be for the dance," Moon explained with a roll of her sparkling green eyes.

"It's okay. You're not that late," he replied. He hesitated, checking to make sure nobody was within earshot besides her, before he quietly added, "you look absolutely stunning," stupidly grinning after that. At least it didn't feel forced.

She blushed enough for it to be noticeable in the dark light, although she was smiling a closed-lipped smile. "Thank you. I didn't realize how hard finding the right earrings would be. Kinkajou is lucky since literally anything can suit her if she changes her scale color."

Moon was wearing a pair of silver, medium-sized earrings that looked like upside down crescents. They were outlined in some black material, and there was a space that looked like an teardrop where they connected to the part that was put in her ear. These

spaces were filled by what looked to be green emeralds, and Winter couldn't help but wonder how expensive they'd been. He didn't ask, for that would be rude. He'd never understood why asking the price of something like that was rude, but all he knew was that it was, so he never asked.

"They really compliment your eyes," he said. "Even the silver matches the little silver scales by them."

She grinned again, that shy, sweet smile that he couldn't help but smile back to. "Yeah. Your tie stands out a lot, but somehow matches, too."

"I'm glad you think so. I wasn't sure whether to go with a necktie or this, because I was sort of worried it would make me look like a dork."

"It does," Moon replied. "But I like it. Makes you seem less like you're attending a funeral. I mean, no offense, but we both know you're usually pretty serious and grim," she told him, reaching up to adjust his tie. "There; now it's less crooked."

He looked over at where Flame was still standing with Tamarin, the two engaged in conversation.

"Any idea why Flame is here?" he asked.

A guilty expression suddenly wiped Moon's grin away. "Well, I knew Tamarin would probably be lonely or sad, not being able to go to the dance with him, and I wanted to give them a chance together. I know he's pretty unstable, but I knew you would be here in case things went wrong, so I asked Sparrow if she could try and convince someone in charge to let him go here for an hour or so. Looks like she succeeded."

Winter just huffed, glaring in the crimson dragon's direction.

"Oh come on," Moon said. "Don't let him ruin our night!

Our night...

Winter took his attention away from Flame and brought it back to

Moon. "You're right. I just don't want more dragons to get hurt because of him...you've already been a victim of his far too many times."

She smiled. "I know you're just trying to look out for me, Winter, but you should worry a lot less. Maybe then you'll be less stressed all the time."

"Who says I'm stressed? I can be totally cool if you want."

"That was a horrible pun."

"I know." He looked back over at the punch bowl, feeling more up to it now that he probably wouldn't be choking this time. "Let's go get some punch."

The pair walked over to where he'd previously been standing and both poured themselves a glass.

"This isn't anything like real fruit, is it?" Winter asked. "You growing up in the rainforest, and all."

She shook her head. "If it was, I guarantee you the percentage of dragons who do eat fruit would double. It's way less sugary than this, because it only has natural sugar. It's still really good though."

They struck up a conversation or two while they were over there, quietly sipping their drinks while the other spoke until they'd emptied the glasses. Then, Moon dragged him over to an array of different fruits piled up that looked like it would collapse at the slightest touch. Which, it in fact did. The top layer fell when she was trying to reach an orange, and it attracted some attention. They just laughed it off, though, like that first day in the science lab that seemed so long ago.

Once they put everything back where it was, she plucked a strawberry from the pile and tried to get him to eat it.

"I'm not sure...what if I choke on all those seeds?"

"That's not how it works, Winter! They're too small for you to choke on, and they don't even fall out of the strawberry to begin

with."

"I don't know..."

"Just try it," she said, shoving the small red fruit into his mouth as he talked. It was far enough back that he was forced to chew it up and swallow, and it turned out to taste pretty good.

"You know that could've killed me, Moon."

She shrugged. "It still worked."

After awhile, a few pairs of dragons started slow dancing, whether it be toward the middle of the cavern, or closer to an empty space on the side. Winter didn't know why they started now, as the music had been right for it the whole time. However, it seemed things were drawing to a close, so maybe that was why. Moon insisted they should try too, and although he was entirely put off at the idea of dancing with her in front of so many judging eyes, he figured that if he'd already been seen with her here, there wasn't much of a point in refusing.

"I'm not exactly sure how to do this," he admitted as they walked over to a mostly empty area in the corner of the cavern. Dancing was never a 'thing' back home, unless it was something like slow dancing. That only happened at Royal gatherings though, and he'd never had anyone to dance with unless it was one of his siblings, that that would've just been awkward.

"Don't worry, it's probably the easiest dance out there," she assured him. "Even the form isn't tricky. I'll guide you at first."

Winter's mind flared with surprise and a little embarrassment as Moon took hold of his left talon, lifting it to about shoulder-level. Then, she grabbed his other talon and brought it to her waist, before putting her free talon on his right shoulder. His instincts told him to stop this, to rip himself away and storm off like an IceWing should, but he didn't listen to them. If he did that, he'd blow his chances with her, chances he shouldn't even care about.

"Now, we just sway to the music," she said, the silver scales by her

eyes shimmering in the blue light.

Why am I doing this? Why am I letting HER do this? I should stop. But I can't. But I have to!

It looked like she was listening to something for a moment, a conflicted expression on her face. Whatever emotion she was feeling quickly subsided though, and Winter wondered just what was up with her. He'd noticed this strange behavior several times before, and it didn't seem one bit normal.

Winter tried to forget about it, beginning to sway just like she told him to. She followed his lead, slowly drifting along to the calming music practically resonating through them.

After several moments, he got the hang of it, starting to feel more confident. He couldn't mask the grin on his face, and Moon smiled in return. Then, that very confidence messed them up, as he forgot to move his tail in time with the rest of him, and it tripped her up. She almost fell backward but he caught her, wrapping his arms around the middle of her back, as trying to catch her by the wrist might cause injury. She wrapped her own arms around the back of his neck to further ensure that she wouldn't fall. Winter expected her to right herself, and though she did steady herself by planting her feet on the floor again, she stayed like that, staring straight into his eyes while he leaned over her.

Why am I doing this? he thought again. *Never mind, I know exactly why...*

Moon laughed, more than a little awkwardly. "Thanks, Winter."

He could practically hear his heart hammering, as if it would make its escape from his chest and leave him a dying mess at any second. "No problem," he said, despite this feeling of adrenaline and tension. He realized their snouts were almost touching, separated only by a few inches of empty space.

Moonwatcher suddenly pressed her forehead against his lightly, in some kind of action Winter had never seen anybody else do before. Was it an act of friendship or something? Gratitude, maybe?

Even...affection?

Whatever this was, Winter didn't want to stop. It felt so, serene, and peaceful, like they were the only two dragons in the entire cavern.

They were painfully reminded that this wasn't the case when Winter narrowly ducked under an orange lobbed at his head from a pure white IceWing a ways away. They met his gaze and glared at him with the ferocity of a polar bear chasing its prey, before shaking their head at him and looking away.

"I think we'd better get going..." Moon whispered, finally letting go of him and standing up.

"I couldn't agree more," Winter replied, following her as she left the way they'd entered. She started going toward their winglet's set of caves, but he stopped her. "C'mon, I've got something to show you."

She looked at him curiously, but proceeded to go with him out into the cool night air outside of the academy. "Where, exactly, are we going?"

"To the top of Jade Mountain," he told her with a smile. "Race you there!"

Winter shot upward, knowing Moon would be close behind. She was a better flyer than he was, at least in terms of avoiding obstacles. The fastest way up the mountain was heavily forested for the first couple hundred feet, but he liked a challenge, so he darted straight into the cover of the trees. However, this wasn't a very good idea, as he constantly had to slow down and alter course to avoid head-on collisions with trees, constantly being whacked by pine branches all the while. He felt a whoosh of air to his right, knowing that it was Moon slipping her way among them while he struggled to do just that.

Once he emerged from the forest, covered in green pine needles and a few cuts on his arms, he saw that she was already nearing the peak. She was going to win for sure, but with a grin creasing his

normally serious face, Winter continued to fly as fast as he could.

By the time he made it to the top of the mountain, she was there, standing with her wings tucked in, sort of like a bird. "What took you so long?" she teased with a smug smile.

"You only won by a few seconds," he said, checking to make sure the pouch he'd been wearing was still there. It was. "I knew you'd win if I went through the forest, since you've been able to practice avoiding trees all your life."

Moon just smiled more. "You wouldn't last a day in the rainforest, Winty. There's vines, and spiderwebs, and all kinds of things to worry about besides trees."

Winty?

"Sorry- it's just a new nickname I though of for you. If you don't like it, I won't use it," she said, most likely noticing his confused facial expression.

"No, it's fine," he said. "I sort of like it, actually."

"Alright then, Winty," she said, emphasizing the name, "is this what you wanted to show me?" The NightWing gazed up at the star-filled sky above them, the white lights twinkling like tiny snowflakes. One and a half moons were up as well, but the stars outshone them by far.

"Mhm," he said. "What do you think?"

"They're beautiful."

He nodded in agreement.

Not as astonishing as she, is though, he thought to himself. He noticed a blush appear on her face, although she kept her eyes trained on the stars. *Hm...strange.*

"Any reason why you brought me here?" Moon asked, curiosity filling every word as she turned her attention back to him.

"Not particularly. Just thought there'd be a nice view tonight," he told her. "Although...there are a couple of things I wanted to give you. I mean, I didn't have to bring you here to give them to you, but why not?"

She tilted her head as he opened up his satchel, removing the two items he'd been keeping safe since this morning when he'd bought them at that little shop near the school. Neither of them had been cheap, but he hoped they would be worth it as long as she liked them.

The first object was a wristband, similar in size to Turtle's gold one with the black stones set in it. This one seemed far prettier to Winter though; the main part of it was jet black, just like Moon's scales, and there were five round emeralds set equally apart around it. There was a silver lining to it as well - literally.

Winter passed it to her with steady talons, as he would actually explode if he dropped, broke, or lost it. Moon gazed at it with wonder and amazement as she slipped it onto her right arm, just below the elbow.

"Wow, Winter...this is gorgeous!" she said as she peered at it closer in the dark light. "And it fits perfectly...thank you!"

"You're welcome; I thought you would like it, since it matches your scales and eyes so well," he said. Before he could give her the next thing, though, she leaned forward, placed a talon on his shoulder, and whispered quietly in his ear...

"Tag! You're it!"

HA! You thought! Also, right now, go to YouTube and search Coldplay, Sky Full of Stars. If you can, try to read this and play it at the same time; again, I wasn't able to link it to Wattpad because apparently it's outdated. Very good song, and I thought it would fit. SO GO DO IT RIGHT NOW AND LISTEN TO IT EVEN IF IT DOESN'T WORK!

The small, dark dragon then flew off, and Winter could just barely see her form against the night sky. Rather than being frustrated, he

decided to play along and raced after her, but not before making sure his satchel was sealed tight.

He saw Moon turn right and start descending down the mountain, and started gaining on her within seconds. She may have been good at navigation, but he was the faster flyer.

But once again, her obstacle avoidance triumphed, as he was so focused on catching up to her that he didn't notice the tall rock spire looming in front of him until he slammed right into it. Moon immediately stopped, turning to see if he was okay. Winter shook it off and smiled to let her know he was alright, and then resumed the chase.

They darted among trees, slipping along the mountainside, disappearing and reappearing out of the few clouds that obscured the incredible view tonight. Moon would occasionally look over her shoulder and smile at him, before going back to trying to outrun him, while also seeming to stay close enough to where he was still motivated to chase her. She was playing with him, and he knew it. Normally he would've given up long before now, as a few minutes had already passed, but there was an insatiable urge for him to keep following her, his body hardly tiring out at all. He could've caught her by now as well, but he was enjoying this far too much to stop.

It's probably something to do with hormones, I guess. I don't care though; I've never felt this...free, before. No rules, nobody telling me what to do, or what I can be, or what I should be doing better...no manipulation, no lies...this is perfect.

He and Moon continued this chase-game for a couple minutes longer, and then Winter decided he'd had enough. The pale blue IceWing surged forward, adrenaline pumping through his veins, and finally matched her speed. She started to bank to the left, but he stopped her by rushing forward again and locking his arms around her torso. It did work, but they were sent spinning in a circle for a few moments before steadying themselves, their laughter echoing throughout the night. The NightWing staring back at him had a silly, yet somehow still beautiful smile on her face that he was sure he matched, minus the beautiful part.

"That was great," she said, winded from the ordeal.

I know I say this a lot, but in this story in particular there's a lot of stuff that would sound really wrong taken out of context, so don't!

"You think so?" he replied, relishing the feeling of her smooth, cool scales against his chest.

Moon nodded, still grinning.

Winter all of a sudden felt a desire to kiss her, even if it was only for the briefest of moments. He would've been executed on the spot for anything like that back home, but here, there was nobody else around to see. Maybe he could just steal one, just for a second...

He started to move his snout closer to hers, but she stopped him.

"Hey, uh..." she said, leaning back to avoid it, a pink hue spreading across her face. "Before we do...any of that, there's something I should've told you months ago, Winter. You're not going to like it, but I need to tell you."

He looked at her quizzically, wondering just what she might mean by that. He thought back to all the strange things he'd noticed about her...how she would sometimes have those sudden 'headaches', and how sometimes it seemed she could tell exactly what he was wondering and answer it for him, like if there was a misunderstanding that crossed his mind and she immediately cleared it up...

No. It can't be...

"No," he whispered, repeating his thoughts. Everything he should've pieced together so long ago suddenly came to light, and he hated, *hated* what it meant.

With guilt-filled eyes, Moon solemnly nodded. "It's okay if you don't believe me, but I already know you do. Winter, I know those powers my tribe made up, like the mind-reading, and visions of the future and everything...they're supposed to be nothing but a lie. But...they didn't entirely make it up. Because...I have both of those

abilities. I'm not sure what makes me have them, and not any other NightWings, as far as I know, but-"

He ripped himself out of her grasp, everything he'd been told about her kind seeming like it was all true now. Winter turned and flew off before she could finish, flying faster than he had been just a few moments ago. He flashed back to about three days ago, maybe less, when he'd admitted that he'd thought about suicide before to his entire winglet. Moon had tried to get him to talk more about it, get him to stay, but he hadn't listened. He'd ran until he couldn't anymore, then avoided her for the entire night and barely talked to her in class.

Now, as she called for him to stop, to just listen, he ignored it once again. His satchel thumped against his side as he flew, and right then, he probably could've beat a SkyWing in a flying race for he was going so fast.

Liars! All of them, filthy, no-good, rotten-to-the-core lying vermin! It's just like everybody's always told me...never trust anyone. Especially not a NightWing. NightWings with silver teardrop scales, and pretty faces, and voices...NightWings who trick you into caring about them, then turn around and snap your heart in two when you thought they were the only dragon you could ever trust...

Winter spotted a rocky outcrop jutting out from the side of Jade Mountain, still very high up from the ground. He dove toward it, and by the time his claws touched down on the cold, dew-speckled stone, his eyes were leaking tears. Hot tears, rushing out like tiny waterfalls down this distressed shell-of-a-dragon's face.

He heard talons clicking behind him, and knew who it had to be.

"Can't you just leave me alone?!" he roared at Moon. "You've already done enough; you lured me into this trap of friendship, then what do you do? You practically drop a bomb on my head with your secrets, and lies, secrets and lies I should've known about long ago...but I was blinded by this, this mask of stupidity!"

He could tell in the dark light that she was crying, too. "Winter, just listen, please! I never wanted it to be like this! I just wanted to

make some friends here, and not have to worry about them thinking I'm untrustworthy, or a freak, with these horrible powers! You think I asked to hatch like this? With these abilities that will make everyone hate me, and fear me?"

Winter just turned and walked closer to the edge of the outcrop. "Well look where NOT telling us got you, Moonwatcher! Is this any better than it would've been if you'd just...just told the truth?"

"No, it's not!" she sobbed. "It's worse, so much worse, Winter. Because...you're more than just a friend to me. I knew it from the day we met, that there was something special about you. And now with you knowing about all this, it just makes everything a million times worse. I'm so, so, so sorry, but I couldn't go much longer without telling someone!"

There was a faint rumble of thunder in the distance. Winter turned to the east and saw dark cumulonimbus clouds approaching, lightning flashing between them. How cliché.

His eyes blurry with tears, he tore his satchel off of him, and threw it at her feet.

"Open it!" he yelled.

She looked hesitant at first, but if either of them were to be joking, now would surely not be the time. Moon picked it up and did as he said, a confused look crossing her face when two silver necklaces fell fell out.

"W-What are these?" she asked, picking them up off the ground.

"It's one of those missing half necklaces," he muttered. "Each necklace has the broken half of a heart on it, and when you put them together...well, you get the idea. I even chose ones with our initials on them."

Knowing what they were only seemed to sadden Moon more.

"Why did you get these?"

"Because I...because I love you, for moons sake!" Winter said, his

anger flaring again. "And that's what makes your lying all the worse! All this time, I've slowly developed these...stupid feelings for you, thinking that maybe, out of the hundreds, if not thousands of dragons on this continent, that YOU would be the only one I can trust. I knew I should've just ignored you, but I couldn't! You're just so...pretty, and smart, and funny, and caring, and everything else that makes me love you, Moon! But now...I see I could never really trust anyone but myself. Just like I've always been told."

Another crash of thunder. Lightning, illuminating Moon's distraught face, glistening with more tears than he'd ever cried in his life.

"You can keep the necklaces," Winter told her, taking on a sullen tone. "I won't be needing them where I'm going."

He looked over his shoulder, saw the edge of the cliff just a foot away. Death, only a foot away. Relief from this awful, unforgiving world, right there. This was it. He just didn't care anymore. Life had screwed him over for the last time.

Winter took another step back.

"Winter, don't!" Moon cried, dropping the necklaces. "Please, we can fix this-"

"No, we CAN'T!" he screamed. "I've tried too many times to pick up the pieces when life breaks me. I can't do it anymore. I just...can't."

He took another step, saw her rush toward him. He took one final step, and felt himself slip over the edge, right into Death's doorway.

But Moon still caught him by the wrist, pulled him back up. She took several steps back, and Winter did too, though he wasn't sure why, when he'd been so looking forward to not having to worry about anything ever again.

Moonwatcher wrapped her arms around the back of his neck, and brought her mouth to his ear.

"Yes, you can, Winter. We can. Together."

And then, they kissed. It was like back at the dance almost twenty minutes ago, when it felt like they'd been the only two there. The same feeling came rushing back to him like a tidal wave, that feeling of not caring who saw them, at least for now.

Amid this feeling of glee and pure calm, Winter realized just how much danger they'd brought to themselves by doing this one simple thing.

"You know what this means, right?" he asked her.

Moon nodded. "We're gonna have to keep this secret. Even from our friends."

"Well, do you think they already know?"

She looked skeptical. "If they did, I would've noticed by now. But we will probably have to tell them once they do."

"But what about-"

"Shhh..." she said. "Just forget about all of that for now. All you need to worry about is the dragon standing in front of you."

He half-smiled, and then kissed her again. There was a stronger rumble of thunder, but he didn't check to see how far away the storm was. There was someone much more important he had to worry about.

However, they would soon find out that the dark clouds approaching wouldn't be the only storm brewing over Jade Mountain Academy...

● Chapter 18 ●

Rain started to drop from the dark clouds above, Moon with her arms still wrapped around Winter's neck, his own around her waist as they kissed on this cliff, high above the academy itself.

*This is so great...*the IceWing's thoughts echoed. *I feel all tingly, like a good version of when your leg falls asleep or something.*

Moon giggled, the noise slightly muffled by Winter's snout pressed against hers.

"What's funny?" he asked, breaking the kiss for a second before resuming.

"Just those silly, innocent thoughts of yours," she replied.

He chuckled. "I assure you, I've done, seen, and experienced too many things someone my age shouldn't have to be innocent."

She didn't want this perfect moment to end, but it did when a downpour suddenly started, the rain hurting a little as it connected with her scales. Moon was grateful when Winter held an icy wing over her to act as an umbrella.

"Let's get back to our cave," he said, having to almost shout over the roar of the rain.

It was a little difficult to find their way back, with the rain lowering the visibility significantly, but together, they were able to find the window to their cave after about ten minutes of searching. They both climbed in through it, and not much water got in with a slight overhang of rock outside the window. Of course, there was

still the rainwater from them as they shook it off, but they could worry about that later; it was nearing nightfall.

"I'm not sure if you're as tired as I am," Moon said, "but hours of shopping with an energetic two-year-old RainWing, and playing tag, and...everything that went down back there has me pretty worn out, so I'm gonna go to sleep. You still have those necklaces, right?"

The handsome IceWing nodded, pulling them out of the watertight satchel he'd been wearing the whole time. "We can put them on in the morning; don't want them getting tangled up overnight or anything. And I'm sapped of energy too, so I'll go to bed as well."

Moon was more than a little disappointed when he moved away from her to go sleep on his ice ledge. She knew it would ruin them if somebody besides one of their friends saw them sleeping close together, but she already missed his icy touch. Even if it was someone in their winglet who saw, it would still be pretty bad.

She could tell Winter noticed the look on her face.

"Miss me that much already?" he teased with a grin.

"Shut up," she responded, hoping it sounded playful and not like she was being rude. "But...yeah, I do."

"Alright," he said, sighing like it would be a burden for her to share his ledge. "Come here, then."

Moon perked up, walking over to his bed.

Winter moved himself to the edge of his ledge and motioned for her to lay down on the other side. "This way, if someone takes a quick glance inside, they'll think it's just me here."

She nodded as she climbed up over him. "Smart." She wedged herself between him and the wall, obviously facing him. Moon felt a shiver go down her spine at the sudden coldness of the rock; even Winter wasn't this cold, because this was actual ice she was laying on.

The NightWing felt something cold and sharp snake around her

tail, at first thinking it might've been some type of snake. So, she was happy to see that it was only Winter's tail coiled around hers, and not a venomous reptile.

"Are you too cold?" he asked, having noticed her shivering.

"Yeah, a little...I didn't know ice could be colder than an Ice*Wing*," she replied.

He smiled. "You wouldn't last ten minutes in the Ice Kingdom, I can tell you that," he muttered. "Not sure if this'll help much, but..." He then slid one wing underneath her, and surprisingly, it did relive a little bit of the cold from the ledge.

Moon smiled at him, his face only a few inches away. "Thanks, Winty."

After that, he placed his second wing over her, and it covered the majority of her body, as he was considerably larger than she was. He wrapped his arms around her and drew her in close to him, like a hug, only better.

"You actually do love me though...right?" Winter asked softly, his cold breath tickling a sensitive spot where the back of her lower jaw connected to her neck.

Moon was a little hurt by his question. "Of course, I do. Look, I know it's gonna be really hard to fully trust me again, but I would never lie about loving you...why else would I have kissed you?"

He shrugged. "I'm just not quite sure what to think about all of this, you being able to read my mind and everyone else's...I know you can't control it, but it just seems..." he trailed off. "And what about that poem-sounding thing you said at the beginning of the year? You know, all that stuff about NightWings disappearing, two IceWings fighting?"

Moon cringed, but she knew he would've brought it up eventually. "I think...I think it was a prophecy, Winter. It's never happened to me before, but it was like something took control of me for a moment; I couldn't control what I was saying, it was all just

spewing out."

Winter didn't seem entirely shocked, instead looking more disappointed that it was what he'd feared. "And my sister Icicle told me she hasn't seen Bigtail lately, and that was two or three days ago...do you think it's already starting?"

Moon sadly nodded. "I'm afraid so."

He just shut his eyes, shaking his head. "I never wanted to get wrapped up in any of this..." he whimpered. "We're gonna have to hide that we're a thing now, that prophecy or whatever else it could be is coming true...and we're the only ones who know about it." It looked like he was crying a little, but it was kind of hard to tell in the darkness.

"Are you crying?" she asked softly. He shook his head, but she saw him wipe his eye with a claw, so she knew he was. "Look, it's gonna be okay, Winter. We'll work through this, I promise."

"But how?" he asked. "I don't want to feel like I'm doing something wrong whenever we do something like this..."

"And you aren't," Moon said. "There's nothing wrong with this; it's other dragons who make everyone think it is. Just, promise me you won't worry about all this too much. I don't want you developing anxiety or anything."

Winter nodded.

She grinned, gently pressing her snout to his in a lasting kiss. After a few seconds, she pulled away, but moved as close to him as was possible. Moon could feel his heart beating through his soft underbelly, and she presumed the same went for him.

"When did you know for sure that you loved me?" she asked, nestling her head in the crook of his neck. "Actually, no; when did you know you felt *something* for me?"

"For sure when you saved my hide on the first day of hunting," he said, replying almost immediately. "Nobody else I know would've been that brave, or stupid."

"Hey!"

"What can I say? You almost got killed."

Moon was about to disagree, but realized how pointless it would be. "You've got me there. For me, I think it was when *you* saved *me* after I tried to save you."

He laughed. "I guess that fat crocodile wasn't all too bad after all. Brought us together, anyway."

Moon nodded in agreement, sighing happily. "You're the best."

"And you're my one and only," Winter said, kissing her on the top of her head. "Let's get some sleep now."

Just as Moon was about to drift off, she saw a faint trace of something blue close to the ceiling of the cave...almost like smoke.

The prophecy...she thought, just before sleep enveloped her.

❄Chapter 19: Unlocked❄

A shrill gasp jolted Winter awake, his foggy eyes barely registering the multicolored blob in front of him as Kinkajou. It wasn't for a few moments that he realized why she'd gasped, or how much of an imbecile he'd been letting Moon sleep on his ledge last night.

The IceWing tried to sit up, but he was facing the outer edge of his bed, and being a little out of balance having just woken up, he toppled over onto the floor in a shameful heap.

"Kinkajou, please don't-" he started, already knowing what was racing through the grinning RainWing's head.

The tiny dragon turned and scrambled out of the cave, calling for Sparrow, surely to tell her what she'd just seen.

"Do that," he muttered with a heavy sigh. He felt a sickening feeling in his chest, knowing he'd already been enough of a moron to give away his and Moon's secret so early. Of course Kinkajou would've seen; she was always in everyone's business.

Winter turned around and saw that very NightWing blinking her tired eyes open, sitting up with a yawn on his icy ledge.

"Hey, Winter," she said. Then, she obviously noticed how worried he must've looked, then her face turned to a mask of disappointment and horror; she must've heard his thoughts. "Not already..."

"Yep. Already," he replied. "Any second now, the entirety of our winglet is going to come barging in here...you think we should just get all of these secrets out of the way? If Kinkajou found out about this, one of them is bound to discover your powers eventually, and

you can't keep passing those pains in your head off as 'headaches'."

Moon just sighed. "Might as well. The only reason I will, though, is because I know at least *you* won't hate me after I tell them...oh, moons...what's my mother going to say? She doesn't want me with an IceWing romantically, and she'll probably kill me if I give away my secret..."

"Guess we both have parental units who will end us if they find out about any of this," he replied with a thin-lipped smile. "Mine actually will, though."

"Yeah, one more thing...did you see that sort of...smokey stuff near the roof of our cave last night?"

This alarmed him. He hadn't noticed anything, but if it was smoke...

"What color was it?" he asked.

"Blue," Moon said quietly.

There was no need to express what Winter realized, as he knew she had realized it too. Whatever the prophecy was trying to convey, it was coming true. Quickly, at that. Even if they had wanted to talk about it, they wouldn't have been able to at the time, because exactly as he'd predicted, Kinkajou came back into their cave, followed by Sparrow, Karma, Qibli, Carnelian, and Turtle. All of them had looks on their faces demanding an explanation for what the RainWing had seen.

"So," Qibli said, wasting no time in prodding the said explanation, "spill it. What's going on with you two?"

Winter took a quick glance at all of them, and the only one bearing a look besides curiosity was Karma, disappointment and sadness evident on her expression. This only added to the feeling of guilt multiplying like a cancerous growth inside of him.

"All you guys need to know is last night, after the dance, things were said and done, and now me and Moon are together," Winter said, cutting straight to the point. "I'm not getting into the details,

and if any of you tell this to someone outside of our little circle," he warned, fixing each of them with a cold glare, "I'll personally make sure you are equally paid back. In different ways each time."

"Uh, how much, exactly, will be equal if that does happen?" Turtle asked.

Winter grinned. "However much I want it to be. So don't."

The SeaWing visibly paled.

"And now, Moon has something she needs to tell all of you as well," he said. "Right?"

The NightWing nodded, getting up from his ledge. She walked forward and he stepped back a little, letting her be the focus of attention.

"So, there's something I've been hiding from you guys for the past couple of months," she said, looking at the floor for a moment. "Winter found out about it last night, and he's still not happy about it. I know you're probably going to hate and distrust me for awhile, but I should've just told you at the beginning, and it was a mistake for me not to. Know how the NightWings had those supposed powers a long time ago, but it turned out they were made up?"

The six other dragons shared looks of confusion, but after a few moments, Qibli seemed to understand what she was getting at. He suddenly shut his dark black eyes tightly, shaking his head slightly, as if silently praying this wasn't true.

"Well...they weren't exactly lying," Moon continued. "I have two powers: the ability to see futures, and the ability to...read minds. Neither of which are under my control."

Qibli was the first to leave, whirling around and bolting from the cave like the devil was after him. Carnelian was second, turning to give moon a hatred-filled stare, before hurrying after the distressed SandWing. Turtle was about to follow them, but Moon stopped him.

"Turtle, wait! For whatever reason...I've never been able to hear your thoughts," she told him, her face already broken in sadness

from the departure of two of their friends. "Whatever secrets you have, they're safe. From me, at least."

That clearly calmed the SeaWing down, but left Winter puzzled. There weren't really any differences between him and everyone else he knew...Turtle was a relatively boring guy, seemed super mopey all the time too. The only visible difference was...

"Your arm band!" Winter exclaimed. "That might be why Moon can't read your mind! Take it off for a second, Turtle, and set it on the floor a few feet away."

The green dragon seemed frazzled, but did this anyway, taking it off and sliding it out of the cave into the short hallway connecting it to the main one.

Winter looked at Moonwatcher, and saw that he must've been correct to think this. Her jade eyes were wide with disbelief.

"He's right; it is your arm band!" she said. "It must be the stones in it, because I don't think anything else about it is especially remarkable - no offense. Can you try and take one out to see if it is that?"

Turtle just nodded, scrambling to go get the arm band. Meanwhile, Kinkajou, Karma, and Sparrow still stood, stunned and confused about all of this, but not leaving just yet. He came back in and popped one of the jet black rocks out of the band, held it in a palm, and once again moved the accessory several feet away.

Moon's frown faded into a slight smile for a moment. "It is those rocks! Winter, would you go try and find Qibli and Carnelian?"

He nodded, but he knew they wouldn't be in their cave.

If I was a nerdy SandWing, where would I go when I was upset? he thought as he left his and Moon's own cave. *SandWings like heat, and it's probably hotter outside than it is inside...but to get the most heat, you go somewhere where either the sunlight is focused to one specific point, or somewhere like the desert, where it's hot everywhere. He obviously wouldn't have time to go there if he only left a couple minutes*

ago...maybe he'll be at the underground lake.

Winter hurried to the body of water, barely running into any obstacles along the way. At one point though, he did trip over some dimwit's homework - dim witted because they were stupid enough to leave it in the hallway - and it got tangled up in his serrated claws.

"Hey, that was my homework!" a bulky MudWing with a scar on his lip said, emerging from a cave to the left.

"And this was a perfectly sharpened talon," Winter shot back, holding up a claw that had had the end broken off after tripping. "Next time, don't leave it in the middle of the hall, genius. I've got places to be."

He freed himself from the tangled mess of paper, then resumed his walk to the lake.

When he arrived, his theory about where Qibli would be turned out to be right; the SandWing was ranting to Carnelian in the middle of the water, where the sunlight poured in through a hole in the roof.

"...how could she not tell us sooner?" he asked, half-shouting. "I thought we were friends...we're all supposed to be friends, right? You know, our little group here is all we've got. We all have to stick together, and if we can't trust each other..."

Winter watched with mild interest as the red SkyWing swam closer to Qibli. She hugged him, quietly telling him something as she nuzzled against his neck. The pale blue dragon cringed; it was a lot harder to watch dragons do that sort of thing than it was to do it himself. He made a mental note to keep things like that between him and Moon private.

"Hate to break up whatever's going on here," he called to them, "actually, I don't. I quite enjoy it, really, but you'd better come back to our cave."

The pair pulled apart, visible blushes on their faces even from this

far away.

"Why would we do that after Moon lied to all of us?" Qibli shouted.

Winter beckoned them to come closer, as he didn't want to shout this next part; enough dragons had already found out the NightWing's secret.

Once they were close, he spoke. "Look you guys, she only did that to protect herself. I'm not happy about it either, but you've got to get over it. Things happen, life moves on. It's no different now. Can *you* imagine having some devastating secret weighing you down all the time that you could never tell anyone, for fear of being hated and mistrusted for the rest of your life?"

Both Qibli and Carnelian shared a look of guilt after his words.

"I'm not saying you have to forgive her, but at least understand why she did it. Now come on; we've just discovered something important."

After the situation involving Moon's powers transpired, the Jade Winglet had been left with a predicament: there were only five of the protective stones, and eight of them. Moon obviously didn't need one, and Winter had volunteered to not take one, as it would probably not be good for their relationship if he was hiding all his thoughts. Then again, her knowing all his thoughts wouldn't be so good either, but there wasn't much of a choice. Sparrow also didn't take one, probably because all her thoughts were just about how to get two dragons together.

The rest of them took one of the rocks - named skyfire stones by Turtle - and had continued on with business, however they all still avoided Moon like she and Winter had predicted.

But now, he had bigger things to worry about.

He and the remaining Midnight Marauders had gathered in the Great Hall with Argo. This was unusual, as it was a Saturday, but

they never disobeyed him. He'd called another emergency meeting that morning.

Glancing over at his twin sister, he saw her face stricken with worry. Bigtail hadn't been seen in days, and while it seemed the staff were trying to keep this quiet to prevent widespread panic, Icicle was clearly worried. Winter could tell she liked him, having experienced the struggles of forbidden love already. It must've been practically killing her for him to just disappear like that; the NightWing hadn't missed a single meeting before.

"Winter!" Argo barked. "Quit starin' off into space; don't you realize how important this is?"

Winter nodded. "My apologies."

"That's what I thought. Anyhow, I've looked into that scroll Pronghorn found, and am pretty excited to tell you all that it will be possible for you to unlock some...interesting powers that the early dragons had long ago. However, it's probably going to be very difficult, and I don't expect all of you to be able to do this. I'm just telling you that it is possible. I'm going to start in alphabetical order for the powers of each tribe, starting with the IceWings."

Winter had to admit, he'd been thinking about this lately. It definitely wasn't the biggest thing on his mind, but whatever this new power could be, he could hardly wait to find out if he could use it himself.

If I am able to unlock some sort of power, Icicle will probably be able to do the same, since we're twins. Not exactly sure how I feel about that, but maybe it'll cheer her up a little.

"It said in the scroll that many, many, many, and like ten more many years ago," Argo began, "IceWings could use their frostbreath to literally create weapons out of thin air. These weapons were made of solid ice, and while they weren't the most effective in warm environments, they at least gave them an edge in combat when they needed it. Winter and Icicle, step forward please."

They both did just that, and Winter found himself more excited

than he'd been in awhile now that he knew what sort of power he could possibly use.

"The first step to unlocking this *cool* power," the SkyWing said with a grin, "is to close your eyes."

Logical.

Winter did so, his world becoming a sea of darkness, the light in this cavern not very strong today.

"Good. Now, imagine you're holding a perfect ball of solid ice. It's completely malleable, so you can turn it into whatever you want."

The pale blue IceWing guessed he and the rest of the group had stepped away, as his voice sounded a lot farther off than before, as well as the faint whispers behind him. He once again did as Argo instructed. Being an IceWing, he'd experienced a snowball fight once or twice before. One time, when he was much younger, he'd had only pure ice to fight with, so in a desperate attempt, he'd formed one into a sphere. When he'd thrown it at Icicle, it missed her, but hit a passerby in the head, knocking them out cold. He'd gotten grounded for a week after that incident.

He not only pictured this ice sphere in his head, but curled his claws as if he was actually holding it as well.

"Okay, now this is the tricky part: you have to simultaneously imagine what you want to make out of that ice and use your frostbreath to create it. This might take a few tries, but I think if anyone can do it, it's you two."

Okay, what do I make? A dagger? A...spiked club? No, that's what my tail is for...maybe a sword. But what kind of sword? A katana? Yeah, let's try that...

Winter imagined a four to five-foot-long sword, as that was the traditional length of a katana. The blade was very thin, as with most, and only a few inches wide. Once he had the blade narrowed down, he pictured a handle for it.

Seems good enough for a first try. Alright, frostbreath, don't let me

down.

Winter exhaled ice like he'd done for years now, but nothing special seemed to happen. He still continued to use his frostbreath until it seemed like it would be enough ice to make a sword with. His eyes snapped open when he heard a sharp clang on the floor in front of him, and he was impressed with himself when he saw he'd been mostly successful. The sword wasn't as clean as he'd hoped, chunks of ice sticking out here and there, but that wasn't a big deal; what was was that he was quite possibly the first of his kind to do this sort of thing in thousands of years.

There were a few 'Wow!'s from dragon's behind them, and Winter saw that, just like he'd theorized, his sister had been able to use this power as well. She'd forged a dagger, and unlike his, her weapon was much more smooth and mirror-like.

Argo congratulated them, then moved on to the next power. Meanwhile, Winter and his sister moved farther away from the group to experiment with their newfound skill.

"This is pretty awesome, don't you think?" he asked her. "We're the first IceWings to do this in...pretty much forever."

Icicle just shrugged. "Yeah, I guess so."

Winter sighed. "You are worried about him, aren't you?"

She threw a glare at him. "I don't know what you're talking about," she hissed, although a blush had made its way onto her face.

He knew she wouldn't tell him anything if she didn't want to, so he just dropped it and continued on improving his katana.

There is one teeny, tiny problem with this, though, he suddenly realized. *I'm in Moon's situation now. I have a power that's been lost for so long that nobody even knows it exists anymore apart from a select few...and I can't tell anyone.*

● Chapter 20: Enough❄

[image]

It seemed that the rest of Moon's winglet - besides Winter, of course - was eventually able to trust her fully again, after a couple weeks of wearing the skyfire. None of them completely ignored her, which had been a promising sign, but even Kinkajou had held a grudge for a couple of days. So all in all, Moon was very grateful they didn't despise her like she'd originally thought.

But the question of how she would break the news to her mother still stood. Secretkeeper would surely be furious, and would probably ground her for at least a week; Moon was especially not looking forward to that, because whenever it happened, she wasn't allowed to do the thing she loved doing most; reading.

It was pure hell, sitting in her room all day, trying to find something to do without the freedom of being able to immerse herself in the wondrous lands scrolls could hold. Often, she just tidied up or slept a lot.

And then came an even more serious question: how would her mother react when she found out about her and Winter?

Moon was thinking about this one Thursday afternoon as she walked back to her cave. She and Winter had gone to the underground lake after classes were over, surprised to have the entire place to themselves for once. Anemone wasn't there to be as condescending as always, but then again, most of that had stopped after Winter had spoken to her. He'd been there most of the time anyway, following through with the suggestion of swimming lessons he'd made at the very beginning of the school year. It seemed like forever ago, with everything that had been happening lately.

His guidance definitely helped, as after awhile, he had to leave to

go work on a late assignment for history, but she'd still been able to swim around on her own just fine. Moon was starting to see the water as more of a friend than an enemy. Once she decided to call it quits, the small NightWing had gone outside to dry off, but only lasted a couple minutes, as the temperature was rapidly declining with November approaching quickly.

Now, she rounded the corner to their cave, using pure muscle memory to do so. She'd wandered these halls so many times, she could probably find her way here blindfolded. While she was still occupied with thoughts concerning her mother, it didn't stop her from seeing the bizarre sight of a certain IceWing in deep concentration on his ledge, his brow furrowed as if he was angry about something.

What in the world is he doing? she thought, deciding to watch this strange behavior a little longer.

She didn't have to wait long before she saw quite possibly the strangest thing she would ever see. It even topped the time she'd watched a large beetle scale a tree, hurling several other beetles off of it as it climbed, only to jump off as soon as it reached the top.

Winter exhaled a relatively small amount of frostbreath, and it took the form of a dagger, the blade as smooth as glass, complete with a handle and everything. The fragile-looking weapon hovered in the air for a few moments until his blue eyes snapped open, and it fell into his open talons.

Not bad...could've done a little better with the shape, but at least I'm getting better, his thoughts rang in her head, standing out from all the other faint strings of thoughts from nearby dragons.

Moon finally entered their cave, the pale blue dragon not noticing fast enough to conceal his knife.

"So, Winty," she said, walking over to stand before him. "How long were you planning on hiding this little talent of yours?"

He cringed, as if he was embarrassed. "I don't know...a few weeks, maybe. I literally only found out I could do this two weeks ago, just

so you know."

"Well, I guess I wasn't the only one with a power I didn't want others to know about," Moon replied, sitting down next to him. "Why didn't you tell me? And...how, exactly, did you figure out how to do that?"

"Long story short, Argo read this scroll on powers that the tribes had a long time ago - like before Darkstalker was around - and wanted to see if any of us could use them. For NightWings, it was just your powers, SkyWings could light themselves on fire without it hurting them, SandWings could sprout spines on their arms that are like the barb on their tails, except not as lethal, SeaWings could use the frill or whatever it's called that runs down their back to store some water in case of emergency, MudWings could develop some sort of fire-resistance, and RainWings could communicate with animals. For IceWings, we could create weapons out of our frostbreath."

Moon was amazed by this newfound knowledge. "Wow. I guess back then, I wouldn't have been such a freak with these powers of mine."

"Don't say that," Winter said firmly, lightly grabbing both sides of her head and turning it so she faced him. "Just because you have something that makes you different doesn't mean you're a freak. And besides, if it does, then we're both freaks."

Moon couldn't help but smile. "That's true. How'd you get so smart?"

He shrugged, grinning too. "Guess I was just born that way. You're still the smartest dragon I know, though."

"I know. But you're the most handsome."

"You're the prettiest," Winter told her.

She just giggled. "Do you think we were this corny before?"

"I know I wasn't," he said. "You though...maybe."

"Shut up," she said playfully, leaning forward and giving him a quick peck on the cheek. "Do you think you should tell everyone else about your...talent?"

"Absolutely not," he immediately said. "They're just recovering from the bombshell you dropped on them a couple weeks ago. Another would probably put them all into cardiac arrest."

One and a half (ish) months later...

Moonwatcher was sitting between Winter and Kinkajou in the Great Hall. It was the end of the last day before winter break, and the Dragonets of Destiny had called an all-school gathering. Everyone knew what it was about; just last week, another NightWing had disappeared. This time, it was Mindreader. Bigtail was still yet to be found, and by now, it was pointless for anyone to try and contain the news. Winter told her his sister was worried sick; it must've been driving her crazy for him to be gone this long. By now, it was clear to both Moon and him that his sister had feelings for the missing dragon.

The cavern was full of chatter, including Kinkajou, who was gossiping with Sparrow.

"Did you hear that Flame tried to sneak back into the academy to visit Tamarin the other day?" the tiny RainWing asked. "I get they're obsessed with each other, but jeez!"

Moon smiled. She'd learned shortly after the dance that Flamarin was now a thing. Apparently the blind RainWing and troublemaking SkyWing had made out during it, and somebody had spotted them and spread the word. Moon was glad to know that Tamarin was happier now, even if it was with someone who'd tried multiple times to kill her.

"Quiet down, everyone," Clay said from a cleared spot at the front of the Great Hall, where he and the rest of the DoD were hovering in the air. The side conversations still continued, though.

"SHUT UP!" Tsunami roared. "WE'VE GOT STUFF TO SAY!"

That got everyone to quiet down.

"Thank you, Tsunami," Clay said, a tone in his voice that probably meant they were going to have a talk after this was over. "As you all should know by now, there have been two disappearances in the past two months here. Bigtail has been gone for weeks, and Mindreader was reported missing just last week. It seems whoever is responsible for these is targeting NightWings, so we completely understand if any of the remaining two of you wish to stay away from the academy until it blows over, or if your parents have you leave altogether. We've notified the parents of every student here, but you NightWings should probably take this more seriously than others are. If you do decide to leave, please make sure someone lets us know before we come back after winter break. That's all we needed to say, and now, you're all dismissed."

The room erupted into chatter once again, students hurrying to the exit, barely able to contain their excitement for the two-week break. Moon got up to leave as well, but Winter tugged on her wing lightly.

Let's hang around for a couple more minutes outside, he thought, clearly meaning for her to hear it. *We should talk about a couple things.*

She nodded, knowing one of those things would be about what Clay had just told everyone.

Moon stuck close to him as they left the academy, walking out the front entrance and onto the landing area where they'd arrived on the first day. Unlike many other students, who were meeting up with their parents and quickly departing, they stood off to the side.

"You don't think your mother will have you drop out, do you?" Winter said first thing. Genuine concern filled his eyes, and Moon knew why. If she did have to leave, they would barely be able to see each other anymore.

"I'm hoping not, but she's always been very protective of me,"

Moon replied. "Chances are she will. I just don't know how I'm going to tell her that you guys know about my powers now...if she doesn't kill me, I'll be grounded for a week at least."

Winter didn't even force a smile like he usually did when there was bad news. "Yeah. Are you gonna tell her about...us, too? You might as well; that way you receive both punishments or whatever else she'll do once she finds out at once."

"I don't know..." she said. Moon looked over to a spot across the landing, where she could see Secretkeeper standing next to a large tree, waiting for her to show up. Luckily, it didn't seem like she knew where Moon was. "Look, I'd better get going before she spots us. Promise you'll send letters?"

Winter nodded. "Not sure how often I'll be able to; I'm going to have to make up for A LOT of missed training back home, and I can't let my parents find out that I'll be writing you, but I'll try my best."

Moon smiled. "That's my Winter." They shared a brief kiss, and then she had to go. At the start of the school year, she hadn't wanted to come to this school in the first place. But now, she found that she could barely bring herself to leave. And it was almost certainly because of him.

"Up, down, up down, up, down," Winter's private instructor repeated like he had for the past ten minutes. "Come on, I've seen better push-ups from seal pups! You've got a long way to go before you can make up all you've missed."

Winter knew he hadn't gotten out of shape while he was staying at the academy. He was still able to do as much as he had physically before he'd ever gone there. So why did it all seem so difficult now?

Oh that's right; because Moon isn't here. She'd probably be cheering me on or something right about now...I miss her already, and it's only been two hours since I got home.

His parents hadn't been there to bring him back, which was expected. They would've surely wanted him and Icicle to find their own ways home, and his sister had arrived before him. He'd received yet another lecture over what he should've done to get there faster and whatnot. Nothing was ever enough here, and it never would be.

After several more hours of grueling training involving hunting, flying, and target practice, he collapsed onto his ledge in his room of the Ice Palace, as weary as he'd been in awhile. The break from all of this had been nice, but it weakened him, leaving him unprepared for what he would face when he returned. And this was only the first day back. He had thirteen more to go.

It was late at night, a blizzard raging outside the one window in this room. These types of storms frequently blew through at nighttime, meaning Winter couldn't see the stars tonight. Or any of the moons. He couldn't even have the satisfaction of knowing that she was seeing the same stars as him, because he couldn't see anything but a haze of snow and hail.

Winter tossed and turned on his uncomfortable ledge for nearly an hour before deciding to write to Moon. He had nothing better to do. He got up and walked over to his desk - also made out of ice - and rotated the moon globe sitting on it until it was glowing bright enough to illuminate the small space. He knew his parents were up, so he had to be careful. They were always up until at least midnight, either arguing about something, or doing their own training, or other things like that.

Dear Moonwatcher, he began to write, but immediately scrapped it. That was too formal.

Hey, Moon

That was better.

Not sure how long it'll take for this to get to you, but it won't be fast enough. Anyway, as soon as I got home, I got lectured by my parents over how I could've gotten here faster, and then I spent the rest of the day doing monotonous training routines. Nothing outside the usual for

an IceWing, especially me. All of it was a lot harder than normal without you being here. Never thought I'd say this to a NightWing, but I miss you already. Can't wait to see you again once we get back to school. If you do go back.

Love, Winter.

He mulled over it for a couple minutes, wondering if it was too short. He decided it was fine, but he did change one thing. He changed 'Winter' at the end to 'Winty'. He knew that would put a smile on her face.

He grabbed a small letter envelope, folded the piece of paper and slipped it inside, and then sealed it, before setting it inside the top drawer of his desk. He would have to give it to the mail-dragon when they came tomorrow morning.

Once he was finished, he turned off his moon globe and went back to bed, knowing several sleepless hours were ahead of him.

The next day, Winter gave his letter to the mail carrier, and then began another exhausting day of training regimens. Being away from her was going to be a lot harder than he'd thought it would be.

He didn't get Moon's reply for another two days, but when it arrived at the end of the day after an evening of sparring, reading it brought a little bit of joy back to him, something he hadn't experienced at all being here again.

Hi, Winter

*I'm sorry to hear things aren't going too well for you. Luckily, my mom says I can still go to the academy, as long as I have somebody protecting me while I'm there. I think you know who that's gonna be *pretend there's a wink face here, because I can't draw faces to save my life*. I did tell her that you and the rest of our winglet know about my powers, and unsurprisingly, I got grounded for a week and a half. I decided not to tell her about us yet; sorry, but I've only gone a few days without reading and I can hardly stand it. I can't imagine what she'll do when she finds out. I've mostly just been helping out Queen Glory with things, and also sleeping a lot. I feel like a RainWing. I miss you so much, too.*

Love, Moon

P.S: I'm not supposed to be writing this to you. Went behind my mom's back for once. I'm kinda scared, but it's exhilarating!

Winter chuckled at the last part. However, he quickly stopped smiling when he realized that Narwhal, his father, had been reading over his shoulder this whole time.

"In love with a NightWing, hm?" Narwhal asked, a look of disgust and disappointment on his face. "I should've known you would do something like this," he growled. "First you betray us by letting the only good sibling out of the three of you get captured, and now you betray our whole tribe by falling head over talons for some...some...mistake!" he roared.

Winter couldn't speak, the blood draining from his face. His arms were shaking, heart racing...how could he have been so stupid? His father was never one to leave any sort of suspicion unchecked. Narwhal must've found out he'd been writing to someone and wanted to find out who. Clearly, he had. Finally, he managed to stand up and utter a sentence that only made this entire encounter worse.

"Don't talk about her like that!" he snarled, making a huge mistake before he even realized it.

Winter was nearly as tall as his father, and just as muscular, but Narwhal still punched him in the face hard enough to make him fall onto the floor.

"You *never* talk back to me again," he hissed. "And if I catch you writing any more letters to that NightWing, you're done for. I'll be making sure your instructor doubles the intensity of your training sessions."

Narwhal stormed out of Winter's room, leaving him a bleeding, broken IceWing, lying on his side on the ice cold floor as both blood leaked from his mouth, and tears ran from his eyes.

What would my friends think of me if they saw me now? he thought,

amid this mess of blood and tears. *They know me as the tough IceWing, at least I think so. I'm not afraid of anything to them. And I'm a Midnight Marauder for Pyrrhia's sake! I shouldn't be felled by one punch from someone barely bigger than myself...but they wouldn't understand. They don't know what it's like to be afraid of your own family.*

The first thing he did was write Moon, but only to tell her he wouldn't be able to send any more letters. He didn't explain why, but kept it brief. Like before, he hid the letter in a drawer of his desk, and would give it to the mail-dragon tomorrow. Now, more than ever, he wished she were here to comfort him.

Winter gave his letter to the mail-dragon the next morning. They asked what happened to him - one side of his jaw had swollen up - but he just told them to get lost. Then, he began another set of training an hour later, not even bothering to eat breakfast.

This time, Moon's letter didn't reply for four days. However, Winter couldn't have dreaded it more, especially when he found out who got to it first. He hadn't wanted her to reply, but, being the worrier that she was, she did.

Winter was doing curl-ups **(or crunches, same thing)** in his room, in the dead of night, on his fiftieth one as his instructor told him when to go up or down, when Narwhal entered.

"Get out," his father told the instructor. "He won't be needing your services anymore."

That scared Winter more than anything had in a long time. His father really did want to kill him.

The flustered training instructor quickly made his leave, and as soon as he was gone, Narwhal hurled an enveloped at Winter's face.

"I told you not to write her again, but did you listen?" he asked. "No, of course not. Neither me or your mother ever had a good feeling about you. We probably should've just left you out for the

polar bears as soon as you hatched."

Winter didn't reply, but he did stand up, looking his father dead in the eyes.

Narwhal stalked forward, a deadly look in his ice-blue eyes. "You know what's gonna happen now?" He produced a knife from behind his back. "I'm going to do what I should've done a long time ago. You were never anything but a-"

Winter sprang forward, knocking his father off his feet and ripping the knife from his grasp. He threw it with all his might at the window, and it shattered, sending the weapon down into the snow far below.

"Disappointment," Narwhal finished, kicking Winter off.

Winter remembered what Argo always said: "Control your anger in a fight. If you let it control you, mistakes will be made. And an enemy will always take advantage of your mistakes."

So, he acted like he'd never known his father in his life. This was just someone who was trying to kill him. They had no personal connection to him. All he had to do was remember that.

Narwhal charged forward, but stopped just as Winter was about to react to defend himself. He felt cold arms wrap around his neck, and before he knew it, he was being held in a headlock. It was like that first day of tryouts for the Midnight Marauders, when Argo had done nearly the same thing.

Narwhal tightened his hold, and Winter's visions went foggy for a moment. Adrenaline was coursing through him; he just had to use it. Remembering how he'd beaten Argo on that first day, he elbowed his father in the face, hearing a sharp SNAP that was probably his nose breaking or jaw cracking. There was a loud scream of pain, but Narwhal didn't let go. So, Winter swept his legs out from underneath him using his tail, falling down on top of him as his father still had his arms around his neck. They both landed hard, and Winter felt a rib or two crack from the impact.

Still, he kept fighting.

Winter pried the claws off of his neck and grabbed one of his attacker's wrists, suddenly twisting it in a way it wasn't meant to bend. Narwhal cried out again, telling Winter he wouldn't be using that wrist for awhile. No more choke outs. At least for him.

Narwhal smashed his skull against Winter's, and that finally made him get off, immense pain in his head like the worst headache he'd ever experienced. His ears were ringing, and he couldn't quite stand up without swaying a little. Narwhal ran at him again, but Winter was ready. He back himself up against a wall, then locked his talons around one of the IceWing's arms and threw him back against this wall, using his other five claws to wrap around Narwhal's throat.

"I learned a thing or two at the academy, Narwhal," Winter snarled. "One of them; opponents who talk too much lose the battle. And two; I don't have to take this anymore."

He brought Narwhal's head back from the wall by about a foot, then slammed it into the solid ice with all his might. His father's eyes rolled back in his head before he even hit the ground.

After a few moments, Winter's adrenaline fading, he suddenly realized the amount of trouble he'd been in if someone saw this. Had he...killed his own father?

He crouched down to check for a pulse. At first he didn't feel anything, and his own heart about stopped. However, he eventually felt one, and while it was faint, at least he was still alive.

Footsteps pounded up the stairs leading to his room.

I have to leave. If anybody sees this, I'm done.

His heart still beating rapidly, he looked at the shattered window, and it occurred to him what he had to do. Without a second thought, he leapt out of it, shards of glass tearing into him as he did so. He immediately flew downward, out of sight from his room.

Winter knew he needed to get out of here. And not just away from the palace; the entire kingdom. He was going to be a wanted dragon

by morning, a bounty on his head for sure. He knew it was self-defense, but nobody else did, so he would be blamed no matter what, executed for sure if he was caught. He couldn't let that happen.

I've always hated it here anyway. I don't care about being a good IceWing, or living up to what my parents expect of me. If they never believed in me in the first place, it doesn't matter. Screw you, Ice Kingdom. If you want me...you'll have to find me first.

And so, Winter flew off, sticking low to the ground to avoid standing out in the sky, heading for the one place he knew he'd be safe.

❄Chapter 21❄

[image]

Yeah I don't like how the Wattpad app does the pictures above stories. The site does it better, but I hope most of you have been tapping the images to see the whole thing, because I didn't start using the app until a week ago. Overall, I like it better than the site, but there are some things from the site I wish would be here, like the formatting.

Winter impatiently waited for nightfall, sitting on the bank of a river somewhere near the mountain chain that Jade Mountain was nestled in. What he would give to go back there right now...to forget that he was now a fugitive, that he had probably given his own father a serious concussion, that he could never go home again.

What have I done? All my life, I've abided by every rule and expectation thrown my way...for five years, I built up my reputation, having to start all over once already...and now I've gone and broken at least half of those rules in the span of a couple of days. I just need to make it to the rainforest. My tribe can't do anything to me there.

He'd been on the run for less than a day, and would've been there by now if he hadn't been moving only under the cover of darkness. He couldn't risk his flashy scales alerting any patrols. Winter could probably take on the usual three soldiers that grouped together, but that would only raise the stakes of what he'd already done.

The sun was less than an hour away from disappearing over the horizon, so he decided to make use of his time and look for something to eat. He hadn't eaten anything for over twelve hours, and felt like his stomach was trying to digest its own acids.

This small river he'd been camping out at ran directly through dense woods, so he was bound to find something edible if he looked hard enough. Hopefully deer. Or boar. Maybe even strawberries; he'd been craving those lately, heaven knows why.

Winter took a few last gulps of water, then entered the thick cover of trees in the hopes that he would find something to satiate his growing appetite.

It kind of sucks to be an IceWing going hunting anywhere that isn't covered in snow...as soon as something sees me, it's going to either run for the hills or try to kill me. The latter would actually be better, considering that I want them to come to me.

After a few minutes, he picked up on a trail of disturbed brush. It looks fairly recent, but none of it seemed destroyed enough for a predator to have done it. It was most likely some kind of herbivore. Winter followed the direction of the debris as best he could, not having dealt with forest hunting enough to be familiar with it. Someone like Moon would have probably caught something by now.

Stop thinking about her; you gotta focus if you want to find something to eat. There'll be time for thinking AFTER I'm done being relentlessly pursued by armed soldiers.

Winter heard a twig snap nearby, and immediately crouched down on all fours. There was the sound of rustling leaves, and he pricked his ears, trying to figure out where exactly it was coming from.

"Behind you, pea-brain," came a guttural snarl. He felt a sharp prod in the back, and knew from the cold touch that it was one of the ice spears that IceWing guards always carried.

Speaking of being pursued...

Winter stood up slowly, his arms up and palms open to show he had no weapons. There were about six male IceWings staring him down, two of them armed with spears. Two others were clenching daggers in their fists, the remaining two holding bows and arrows.

"Did you really think you could outsmart your own kind?" the one who seemed to be in charge growled, prodding him once more with his spear. "We know how you think, how you behave. You can't be a prince without having practically your every move tracked, so we know everything about you. And the best part: you're like every other IceWing on this continent. You're no different than any one of us apart from your title. Now listen, kid; the queen has ordered us to execute you as soon as we see you. She's not going to mess around with any formalities, and neither are we. So either let us finish the job quick," he said, leveling the point of the spear to his throat, "or you can resist, and we'll make things much more painful."

Those bows won't be very useful up close...better try and take them out first. Actually, it would be better to take care of those spears before that.

Winter took a couple of steps backward. The soldiers all tensed,

the two with the bows each aiming right at his chest.

"No, you listen to me," he retorted. "I don't think you have any idea what you're messing with. So it would be in your best interests to leave right now, unless you want thing to become...unpleasant."

"Is that a threat?" the lead IceWing snarled, jabbing him in the stomach with the flat end of his spear.

"I don't know..." Winter said. He closed his eyes for a few moments, exhaled frostbreath, and opened them as the icy handle of a katana fell into his open palms. "Does *this* look threatening to you?" he asked, pointing the end of the blade at the lead IceWing.

All of them looked equally stunned, their jaws hanging open in disbelief. Winter smirked, but he knew they wouldn't back down. It wasn't in an IceWing's blood to back down from a challenge.

"Kill him!"

The archers were the first to attack, their arrows zipping through the air. They would've embedded themselves in his chest had he not dashed away in time, and Winter flew over the heads of the four other soldiers as he hurried to take advantage of them reloading. He landed between the two of them, and he slammed the handle of his sword into one of their heads, sweeping the other's feet out from under them and slamming a fist into their face hard enough to knock them out. That left four.

One of the dagger-wielding dragons rushed at him, the blade of his knife glinting in the dim light as it flashed toward Winter's face. He ducked, then smacked their weapon away with his own, hearing it tumble away into the foliage. Winter heard footsteps behind him and whirled around to see the second IceWing with a dagger preparing to literally stab him in the back. He clubbed the first soldier in the head with his tail as he dealt with this one by punching him in the stomach, then slamming the handle of his katana down on their head when they doubled over in pain.

"Only the two of you now, huh?" Winter asked as he turned around to face the last soldiers. "If I were you, I'd spare myself the pain and leave right now."

One of them shot a glare at him. "And if I were you, I wouldn't be talking to two armed soldiers with weapons that outmatch yours in reach that way. Face it, kid. You're not leaving this place alive."

"That's where you're wrong. I'm leaving, whether you like it or not."

Winter dropped his sword and wrenched the spear from the soldier's grasp, slamming the blunt end against their head, leaving

them a collapsed heap on the forest floor. He wasn't able to react quickly enough as the second dragon jumped on top of him, pinning him down with his spear pressed against Winter's throat. Winter felt his lungs struggling, trying to suck every molecule of oxygen in as they could, but he was quickly suffocating under the immense pressure on his throat.

"Game over, pal," they hissed.

But Winter refused to go down this way, to some grunt at the bottom of the chain in the Ice Kingdom. He got enough leverage to flip himself over so that he was now on top of the soldier, and he pushed their spear down hard on their throat. Their face quickly took on a shade of light blue as the oxygen drained from their body.

"Nice try," Winter said amid the struggle. "Better luck next time. Oh, wait; there won't be a next time, because you're never going to find me. And even if you do, I'll be ready."

Once the soldier had passed out, Winter disposed of all the dropped weapons in the area by tossing them off into the woods. That would delay them further, giving him more time to get where he needed to be.

Dinner can wait. If one search party found me, there's bound to be more around here. Besides, if I leave now, I can make it by morning for sure.

With the sun gone over the horizon, and the night sky slowly engulfing Pyrrhia, Winter flapped his icy wings and took off once again.

Normally, it only would've taken Winter an hour to fly to the rainforest, but since he had to be extra careful and also had to lose a couple groups of soldiers at different points during the night, it ended up taking two and a half hours. Aside from the bruises on his neck and a cut or two on his chest, he hadn't sustained any concerning injuries from the first search party. Of course, his jaw was still swollen considerably from the other night, and a couple of his ribs were surely cracked.

I bet they're gonna have a grand old time admitting to Queen Glacier that they were bested by someone less than half their age, AND that they lost their weapons. Oh, it feels good to know that I never have to go back there again. No more worrying about stupid, meaningless ranks, or countless more dinners filled with arguments...

Winter held the silver necklace hanging from his neck between two claws. It wasn't the one with the two silver circles on it to represent

his former rank back home. He'd gotten rid of that long ago. Rather, it held the left half of the charm, that when combined with Moon's nearly identical right half, would form the small silver heart that he'd grown to love. It was a miracle the thing hadn't broken or fallen off during the scuffle in the forest.

It was probably around midnight or so that he found the little hut that Moon and her mother lived in. It was fairly small compared to some of the other similar structures here, but like the rest, it had been constructed closer to the canopy of the rainforest. He had no clue how anybody could survive here, with the constant swarms of mosquitoes - he'd been bitten by those nasty little things at least fifteen times in the last half hour - and the humidity, not to mention all the noise. It seemed like this place was always alive; there was the occasional howl of a monkey, frogs croaking, insects buzzing, the screams of some far-off animal probably being mauled by a panther. How could anyone get to sleep around here?

Winter knew he probably shouldn't go knocking on the front door at this hour, if at all. He hadn't meant Moon's mom yet, but from what he'd heard, she wasn't too fond of his tribe. He remembered though, that Moon usually had trouble sleeping at night. Something to do with being a NightWing, or maybe because of her powers, but neither of them were certain. Maybe she was still awake.

He hoped he was being covert as he flew around the back to see where her room was, but it wasn't exactly easy to not stand out in the rainforest as an IceWing. As he went around, he counted three windows in the entire hut: two in the main living area, and one in Moon's room. They were all made with translucent leaves instead of glass, which was to be expected. Clearly, Queen Glory wanted to use what resources they had here.

Winter took a look inside, and saw Moon in what had to be her bedroom. The only thing that wasn't a shelf for storing scrolls was her bed, which was basically what she had at the academy, except with a wooden frame and a mattress and blanket made out of leaves and moss.

Guess they've got more leaves than they know what to do with here.

He couldn't exactly knock on a leaf window, so he sort of just rustled the leaves around until it got her attention. Although it hurt to do so, he still smiled when he saw her bewildered face as she did a double take. The small NightWing got up from where she was reading a scroll in bed and walked over to the window, motioning

for him to back up a little so she could open it. He did just that, waiting as she slowly and quietly opened it.
"What are you doing here?!" Moon whispered, a mixed look of happiness and surprise on her face. "How did you even - wait, what happened to you?"
"Long story," he replied, keeping his voice low. "Can I come in?"
She nodded, stepping aside so he could squeeze through. "Careful. I'm already being risky by reading while I'm grounded; if my mom finds out I let you sneak in..."
It took a few moments, but he was able to crawl in and touch down gently on the wooden floor. Moon shut the window, and then wrapped him in a fierce hug.
"I'm really glad to see you," she said. "After you said you wouldn't be able to write anymore, I knew something must've happened...so what happened?"
"My father found out I was writing to you. I guess he assumed you were a NightWing based on your name, and he flipped out. Not surprising, but anyway, he punched me and that's why my jaw looks like someone stuck a kiwi under my scales."
"That's horrible," Moon said, her green eyes filled with sadness.
"And then a couple nights ago, after I told you I wasn't able to write anymore, he found the letter you sent back and tried to kill me," Winter explained. "He had a knife, and kept talking about how he and my mother should've abandoned me when I was little. I know he would've done it, even after I threw the knife out the window. I...I beat up my own father. I probably shouldn't, but I feel bad about it. I thought I killed him for a minute, but he still had a pulse. I think I gave him a concussion though, and now I can never go back unless I have a death wish."

Moon squeezed him tighter. "That might be for the best. Were things always like that there?"

"You mean the beatings?"

She nodded.

"Not always, but often enough," Winter said. "After that happened, I knew I would probably be safe here. My tribe can't do anything to me - at least not legally - as long as I'm not in the Ice Kingdom. I did run into a few search parties on my way here, but I only had to fight one of them."

"Still..." Moon said softly, tucking her head under his chin. "You don't deserve any of this, Winter."

"You wouldn't say that if you knew about all the things I've had to see and do..."

She looked at him curiously. "Like what?"

"I probably shouldn't talk about it," he said, his words coming out with an edge to them that he hadn't intended to be there. "There's still...what, ten days left of break? What am I going to do until then, is my main question."

Moon grinned. "We both know the answer to that. You'll just *have* to stay here with us," she said, jokingly making it sound like it would be a huge burden.

"But what about your mom?"

Moon appeared to ponder that for a few moments. "How about tomorrow morning, you knock on the front door and act like you weren't here tonight? I'll get it, and from there I guess you can tell her what happened. Maybe if she knows why you're here, she'll be a little more inclined to let you stay. And I also won't end up double-grounded as long as she doesn't think I snuck you in tonight."

Winter smiled. "That sounds pretty foolproof. Even if she answers the door, it'll probably work out."

"I know; I'm a genius, aren't I?" Moon boasted. He never saw this side of her at school, but to be honest, he liked it. "Alright, I don't think my mom will be up this late, but just in case she is and decides to come check on me, you'll have to find a spot to hide."

Winter looked around in the darkness for a couple of minutes, but there was almost nowhere he could hide without being immediately spotted because of his flashy scales. He couldn't cram himself under her bed, and the rest of the room was open, apart from the scroll shelves at the perimeter.

"There's only one thing that might work," he said. "What if I try and hide under your leaf blanket? If you're asleep, it'll look like you're the only one under there."

"That should do," Moon said. "You're not just using it as an excuse to sleep in the same bed as me, right?"

"No, and even if I was, we slept on my ledge that one night at the academy," Winter replied.

"Touché. Let's try to get some sleep. You don't want to have bloodshot eyes tomorrow when you meet my mom; she might think you're...on something."

He chuckled slightly, making sure to muffle the sound with his talon. He got in her surprisingly comfortable leaf bed, squeezing

himself against the wall as much as he could before pulling the covers over himself, while still allowing his snout to poke out so he wouldn't suffocate. Moon got in after him, hunkering under the blanket with him.
"Just so you know," she whispered, "it's okay if you just...need to have a good cry. Everyone does once in awhile, and I feel like...I just think that maybe you bottle up your emotions too much."
"I know I do," Winter said blatantly. "But I guess at this point, it's pretty instinctual. It's kind of hard for me to just...force myself to cry or something, after all these years of being taught to hide my emotions."
He felt her slide a star-speckled wing over him. "That's really awful, Winter. You don't need to worry about that anymore, though. You don't always have to be the tough guy." After a moment, she added, "even tough guys cry sometimes. And the only one who would know about it is me. I won't tell anybody if you do."
Neither of them spoke for the rest of the night, but at some point, Winter did feel a few tears leak from his eyes. And he didn't feel one ounce of shame crying, for the first time in his life.

Chapter 22: Acceptance

Remember Moon, just act like you didn't know this was going to happen, but don't make it obvious that you're trying to do that. Simple enough.
The sun had risen over the rainforest, its lush beauty coming to life as the rays of light poured down. Droplets of dew lingered on impossibly green palm fronds, flowers bloomed and uncurled to absorb as much sun as they could, and there wasn't a single cloud in the sky. It was looking to be a beautiful day; maybe she and Winter could go for a fly or something later.
That is, as long as my mom doesn't chase him away. I know she doesn't like IceWings, but if she'll just see that he's different, I think they can get along. Now come on, Winter, hurry up with the plan!
Once she'd heard her mother wake up for the day, Moon had told him to go back outside and commence with their plan of action in about ten minutes. Now, it *had* been ten minutes. What could be taking him so long?
There was a knock, but it wasn't at the front door. Rather, it was Secretkeeper coming to say good morning.
"Hello, Moon," her mother said, rubbing her eyes. "Did you sleep well?"
"About as well as I normally do," Moon replied. Which meant not much at all.
Secretkeeper sighed. "Maybe we should go to the doctor to see if there's any way for you to get more sleep; I know NightWings normally don't get a lot of sleep at night, but even for a NightWing you don't get much."
Moon gave a smile that wasn't entirely forced. "Don't worry Mom, it's fine. I never feel really tired, so maybe I just don't need as much sleep."
"If you say so," her mother said skeptically. "When you get hungry for breakfast, I think there's still some fruit left in the icebox from a couple of days ago. I'll go hunting today and bring back some other stuff, but there's that for now."
Secretkeeper then left to go do...something. Maybe read. Moon never knew exactly what her mother did during the day.
I'm starting to get worried about him. He wasn't supposed to take so

long...I'd better go see if something happened. If he gets taken away from me, and in a permanent way because I was too trusting or oblivious...I could never forgive myself.

Moon went outside, the warm, sunny day the exact opposite of how she was feeling about this. There was no sign of anything happening at the front door, but Winter wasn't anywhere near her hut, at least as far as she could tell. She did notice, though, a branch or two snapped off of a nearby tree.

There wasn't a storm last night or anything, and if anyone was using it to build a house or something, they probably would've taken more than a couple measly branches...something bad must've happened to Winter.

A sickening feeling crept into her stomach as the small dragon continued that way, hoping she could find him before anything terrible would happen, if it hadn't already. Luckily, living here for her entire life had taught her how to follow a debris trail, to tell whether or not a pile of leaves had been disturbed, that sort of thing. Using those tactics, Moon eventually found herself growing closer to the sound of quiet voices, although they were deep and gruff. Whoever they were, they had to be adult males. Not the best opponent to be up against if things went south.

Moon pushed a couple of stray vines out of her way, silently slinking through the underbrush of the rainforest and batting at a small swarm of gnats pestering her. Everything here was always wet, so there was no need to worry about stepping on a dry twig and giving away the fact that she was here.

She grew closer and closer to the voices, until she was able to figure out who they were coming from. Moon came upon a tiny clearing, no more than ten feet wide, and almost gasped when she saw two IceWings clad in armor and holding spears standing over the unconscious body of Winter. At least, she *thought* he was unconscious, until he opened one eye and winked at her. He must've been waiting to see if she would try to find him. Good thing she did...but what did she do now?

"I bet we'll get a raise for this, huh Polar?" one of the soldiers said. "The queen is going to be thrilled!"

"Not if we don't bring back any evidence that we actually killed him, half-wit!" Polar snarled. "She said that we had to...decapitate him, remember?"

"Aw, do we really have to?" the first soldier replied, a sick look on his face. "We may be ruthless, but that's just morbid and

gross...can't we take a claw, or his tail instead?"

They're gonna kill him if I don't do something! I should cause some kind of distraction...hm...I'll pick up a stick or a rock or something and throw it somewhere so it makes a noise and gets their attention. Yeah, that might work.

Moon grabbed a palm-sized stone that was wedged into the mud, picked a spot several meters away, and threw it. But, she forgot to take into account how bad she was at aiming her shots, and she ended up throwing it at a tree right in front of her. It hit hard, and while it did grab the attention of the soldiers, it brought them straight to her.

"A NightWing, huh? Thought you could get away with spying on us, little thing?" Polar hissed, pointing his spear dangerously close to her chest. "Tell you what; I'll be nice today and give you the choice to run away and forget you ever saw this. Do that, and we won't brutally murder you. If you don't, we will, starting by popping out those pretty green eyes of yours."

Moon stepped back a few feet, but found herself up against a tree. Both soldiers had their spears aimed at her throat now; there was nowhere she could run. Trembling with the fear that she was going to die here, she couldn't speak. Her mouth felt like a barren desert, while the rest of her was shaking like an active volcano and as sweaty as an overweight dragon trying to run a marathon.

"I...I don't..." she said, not entirely sure what she was trying to say.

The first soldier rolled his eyes. "This is a waste of our time. Let's just kill her and get it over with," he said to Polar, grinning sinisterly when Moon felt herself pale.

"I'm with you. You had your chance, girl. Unfortunately for you, you didn't take it," Polar replied.

"And unfortunately for *you*," a familiar blue IceWing growled, "that's my girlfriend, and it makes me *really* angry when dragons try to kill her."

Polar was the first to have his lights knocked out. He whirled around and was immediately downed by an elbow to the face. The soldier Moon didn't know the name of was taken out shortly thereafter. Winter kicked him in a spot that was very sensitive for guys, and left him wheezing and curled up on the ground. Then, the ice blue dragon picked up the spear he'd dropped and slammed it into the side of his head with an audible CRACK!, and the unfamiliar IceWing's eyes closed.

"That's what they deserve for messing with my girl," Winter said, spitting on both of them with a victorious look in his arctic blue eyes.

The first thing Moon did was hug him, obviously. He'd just saved her for the fourth or fifth time in the last couple of months; why wouldn't she?

"Good job, Winty," she complimented. "That was smart, faking that you were unconscious."

"Don't give me all the credit," he told her sternly. "If you hadn't come along and provided a distraction, I wouldn't have had a chance to attack those idiots." He looked over at the unnamed soldier. "If he has kids, he won't have to worry about having any more," Winter said with a smirk.

Moon grinned, kissing him for a few moments. "Nope. And if he wanted kids but never had any, that's too bad for him. How did those soldiers even find you, though?"

"Must've figured out which direction I went, I guess and assumed I came here," Winter told her. "They snagged me while I was waiting at your front door and dragged me out here. I couldn't do anything, because they both had their spears at my throat. They would've definitely killed me if I'd tried anything. Then, one of them hit me across the head with a spear, and it did hurt, but didn't knock me out. That's when I played possum until you got here."

Moon gave him an empathetic look. "Are you okay?"

He nodded. "I'm gonna have a bruise by morning, but I think I should be fine."

"Good. Wouldn't want anything to happen to you," she said, giving him another kiss. "I really don't know how I lived without you for so long. You know, if our tribes hated each other a lot less, maybe we would've known each other sooner."

"Yeah," he said quietly, seeming like his mind was somewhere far-off at the moment. "Maybe. Are we still going through with that plan?"

Moon nodded. "If anything, this'll help your case. I'll go back inside and you can wait a few minutes before knocking, but this time, holler if there's trouble."

She left first, telling Winter to wait about thirty seconds so it wouldn't seem like an IceWing was following her with bad intentions, since most dragons would think that. Moon got back to the hut, still quite shaken about what had just happened. Her

mother didn't ask any questions, because she'd only been gone a few minutes, and it wasn't abnormal for Moon to spend a few minutes outside in the morning.

"Is it nice outside?" Secretkeeper asked when she got back. She was in the kitchen, by the sound of her voice.

"Yeah, pretty nice. It's less humid than normal, too," Moon replied, sitting down in her favorite chair in the main living area of the home. It wasn't even very expensive, as it was quite simple and wasn't built with high-quality or rare materials. Just wood for the frame and seat, and a dark blue cushion made out of some incredibly soft fabric. It was like sitting on a cloud, and she always went here to read if she didn't feel like being cooped up in her room. But, instead of burying herself in a scroll, she buried herself in anxiety as she waited for Winter to knock.

How's Mom going to react? I know she'll be suspicious at first, but what will she do after she finds out why he's here? I hope she'll let him stay, at least for the rest of break. Come to think of it, where is he going to go during the next school break? I don't think she'll want him to stick around after this...

Time flew a lot faster than she thought it would, as she quickly heard a knock at the front door.

"Hey Moon, would you get that?" her mother called from the kitchen.

"Sure!" she replied, glad she would be the one to answer. Moon opened the door, Winter standing on the other side.

"Who is it, honey?" her mother asked.

"It's a friend from school," Moon half-lied, winking at Winter. "Can they come in?"

"Of course," Secretkeeper replied, "I'll be there in a minute."

Winter walked in, and after Moon shut the door, she brought him over to the couch in the living room. It was the same style and colors as the chair, but for whatever reason, not as comfy. But she didn't want him to feel threatened or intimidated if he was sitting there by himself as her mother questioned him, or did whatever she was going to do.

"That was easy," he said quietly. "Then again, all I had to do was come in."

After a few agonizing moments, Secretkeeper finally walked in. Moon probably should've been dreading it, but she was excited to get this over with. Her mother definitely wasn't expecting their

visitor to be an IceWing, as she looked mildly surprised when she saw Winter.
"I remember you," she told Winter. "I saw you that one day at the academy. I never did get your name, but you can just call me Secretkeeper." Her mother took a seat in Moon's usual spot, the chair. She was being nice to Winter, but she looked at her daughter in a way that said 'We're having a talk about this later.'
"I'm Winter," he said, not seeming the slightest bit nervous. Moon knew he was freaking out on the inside though, stressed-sounding thoughts prevalent in his head. "It's nice to meet you."
"Nice to meet you too, Winter," Secretkeeper said with a warm smile. "So what brings you here, all the way from the Ice Kingdom?" He glanced at Moon, and she returned it with a subtle nod.
"Before I say anything, just know this isn't as bad as it's going to sound," Winter told her.
Secretkeeper sort of tilted her head curiously, like Moon subconsciously did sometimes. She'd gotten a lot of behavioral traits from her mother. Whoever her father was, she must've gotten her aggressive side from him, as her mother's was a lot calmer than hers usually was.
"My tribe is actively hunting for me," he said carefully, "because to them, I'm a criminal. But they don't know the full story. You see...my parents were never very supportive of me. At all. I could get into all the things they always told me I needed to do better, but that would take a lifetime and a half. They were basically always breathing down my neck about stuff, and sometimes my father would even beat me if I really angered him. That happened a few nights ago, because I was sending letters to Moon and he caught me. I'm not sure how frowned upon it is here for an IceWing and NightWing to communicate, but there, you only do that if you have a death wish."
"So that's who was sending those letters," Secretkeeper said. "I'm sorry about your parents being that way. Moon's father was...never the best either, but at least she didn't have to go through anything like you do."
"Like I *did*," Winter said. "I wrote another letter telling her I wasn't going to be able to after that, and my father found the note she sent back. This was two nights ago. He, um...tried to kill me. Had a knife, even told me he was going to. I had to defend myself, and I did. I probably took it a bit too far, but I eventually knocked him

out, and then I had to leave the kingdom." Moon could see he was getting a little choked up. "Like I said, they don't know the whole situation, and wouldn't believe me if I tried to explain. Yesterday when I was coming here, I was ambushed by a search party of six, and then a duo when I got here this morning."

Their plan seemed to be working. Moon's mother was clearly feeling empathetic toward him now.

"That explains those cuts on your chest and your jaw," Secretkeeper said. "You poor thing...I get that your tribe is known for being ruthless - no offense - but that seems like a bit much for one dragon."

"It would be for a normal IceWing, but I'm a prince," Winter told her. "Nephew of Queen Glacier. So that's probably why they're sending so many soldiers my way. They aren't even bothering to bring me back for execution; the search party told me they're supposed to kill me on sight."

"So, Mom," Moon began, knowing Winter might have a breakdown if he had to talk about this for much longer, "he needs somewhere to stay until things die down, and we were wondering if he could...stay with us. Just for the rest of break."

Even after hearing why Winter was here, Secretkeeper still looked unsure as soon as the words left her lips.

"Hey Winter, we're gonna go into the kitchen for the minute," she told him, standing up and beckoning for Moon to follow. "We'll be right back."

Moon gave him a sad glance and brushed a wing against his before she went, knowing her mother still might not allow him to stay.

She and her mother entered the small kitchen. It took up just a little more space than her own room, and it had some wooden cupboards mounted on the walls as well as a counter, but those were mostly for decoration, as they rarely needed to use them. There was also a large cooler in the corner, where they stored leftover food.

"Mom, please?" Moon asked. "He's got nowhere else to go, and he won't be safe anywhere but here."

Her mother sighed, rubbing her temples. "I don't know, Moon...couldn't he go to Thorn's Palace or something? They've got good protection."

"He'll probably have a heat stroke in the first hour he's there," she replied. "IceWings aren't built for deserts."

"You're right about that...how do I know he's not like the rest of his tribe? Selfish, uptight, condescending..."

Moon was just plain annoyed at that remark. "I wouldn't ask you if he could stay if he was a jerk, Mom. I told you, he's not like other IceWings! Can't you just let him stay?"

Secretkeeper folded her arms, staring at moon with her own less-green eyes. "Why do you care so much about this IceWing, Moon? I thought you were afraid of them."

She shook her head. "Not Winter. And I care about him, because...he and I are..together."

Her mother raised her eyebrows. "When were you going to tell me about this?" Her tone was more than a little angry, which was not a good sign.

"I wanted to tell you when I told you that my friends know about my powers, but I didn't want to get in even more trouble," Moon said, feeling helpless at this point. "Look, I told you about how that guy Flame tried a few times to kill me, right?"

Secretkeeper nodded.

"He would've succeeded if Winter hadn't been there. He saved me twice, and there was a third time where he got hurt and couldn't really fight, but he still tried! And then there was this girl, Anemone, who was picking on me whenever I went to this little underground lake there, and he got her to stop when he was there and saw it happen. I'm telling you, he's a good dragon; you just have to trust me."

It appeared that after she explained that, it changed her mother's mind.

"Why didn't you tell me that sooner?" Secretkeeper scolded, a smile on her face. "If it was him who helped you, then of course he can stay."

Moon felt a grin crease her own face. "Thank you so much!" she exclaimed, hugging the NightWing before her. "You won't regret it, I promise!"

"And," Secretkeeper continued, "I suppose that, while he's here, you can be un-grounded. It wouldn't make much sense if you still had to stay in your room all day when your boyfriend is here." She said 'boyfriend' in a more excited tone, which made Moon even more delighted than she already was. It looked like things were going to work out after all.

Moonwatcher was racing through the lowest level of the rainforest, fleeing from her pursuer, who was crashing through the leaves and underbrush just behind her. It was nearing night, and sunlight was already scarce enough here, so the only light came through tiny gaps in the canopy far above.

I gotta keep running, her mind kept pushing, though her body was exhausted. She'd been being chased for at least ten minutes now, and the dragon chasing her had no intent of slowing down anytime soon. *I can't let him win...*

Unfortunately, her and Winter's game of tag came to a disappointing close as he pounced on her from behind and pinned her to the forest floor, a triumphant smirk on his face.

"Gotcha," he said, as if it wasn't obvious enough with her lying face-up, her back probably covered in mud and leaves. She didn't mind though, because they were together and happy.

"Aww, and just when my body was about to collapse from exhaustion," she mock-whined. "Gonna let me up?"

All that did was make him grin more. "Come on, I can tell you like this."

"Like what?"

"Being pinned down on the ground by such a handsome, muscular, intelligent guy like myself. Not to mention that I'm a prince."

Moon rolled her eyes. "I don't know about intelligent..."

He playfully punched her in the shoulder. "I am, too!"

"I know, just messing with you," she replied. "Handsome and muscular for sure, though. But don't get too cocky."

He sort of snorted, but it was more of a huff. "Why? You gonna tackle me, princess?"

Moon smiled, and then pushed upward with enough force to flip them over. "Sort of," she said. "Who's on top now, Winty?"

He sighed in defeat. "You are."

"That's right," she told him, flashing her own victorious grin. "Now shut up and kiss me, snow-for-brains," she teased.

After several moments, they pulled away, but Moon still stayed on top of him. Winter wrapped his wings and arms around her mud-caked back and pulled her closer to him. She sighed in contentment; this was perfect. Moon felt so safe here, her head resting on his chest, feeling like she was in a chilly, cozy tent with his wings around her.

Moon could tell the sun was about to set, and she wanted him to

see it. She didn't know if they were different here than in the Ice Kingdom, but she watched the sunset almost every night, and wasn't going to miss out on it.
"Come on, let's find a big tree really quick," she said, getting up and brushing herself off. Moon spotted one quickly and flew up to nestle herself in its branches, Winter doing the same. The treetop swayed with the added weight, but most of the trees here were very healthy; she'd never had one break when she watched the sunset. There was a parting in the leaves, enough for them to get a good spectrum of it without the sun burning their retinas. The fiery orange ball was halfway under the horizon, the sky a dark hue of pinkish-red at the lowest layer, followed by a lighter pink, then orange, and then yellow. The few clouds obstructing it were almost pitch black against the light, and now was when the rainforest would come alive.
Sure enough, all the creatures that came out at night began their day, and those whose were about to end said goodnight to one another. Crickets and cicadas began chirping, frogs sang, birds tweeted, the big cats began their yowling. She was used to all of it, but Winter seemed a little freaked out.
Moon giggled. "Don't worry, this noise is completely normal," she said. "It's the rainforest: basically the big city of the animal kingdom."
"No kidding," he said, keeping his eyes trained on the sunset. "You should see the sunsets in the Ice Kingdom...they're more vivid than anything else I've ever seen there, with it being to close to the poles. That's what I'm going to miss most about home: the scenery. I wish you could've seen it..."
Moon turned to look at him, noticing with a pang of sorrow that he was crying a little. She couldn't imagine what it would be like to have to leave the only home you've ever known behind forever. It must've been destroying him inside, even if it didn't seem like it on the outside.
She curled a wing around him and leaned into his side, looking up at him. "It's gonna be okay, Winter. I promise. At least you still have memories of the good things from home."
He sniffed, wiping at his eyes. "Yeah...like snowball fights with my siblings, before everything started changing. I never told you I have a brother, did I?"
Moon shook her head. "Is he at the Ice Kingdom?"

"He's...dead," Winter replied. "And it's all my fault...happened years ago. I've never really gotten over it. His name was Hailstorm. He was always so carefree and relaxed...I don't know how he did it. But he was always the favorite of our parents...he was great at everything my tribe is supposed to be great had, yet he barely had to try...I guess that's why I've always taken myself and other things so seriously. Maybe, subconsciously, I was always trying to be like him, have my parents like me."
"What happened to him?" Moon asked quietly. The sun had already set, and darkness was now settling over the land.
Winter moved a little closer to her. "We were out flying one day. It was beautiful and sunny, not a cloud in the sky. Just like today was. But we got caught in the forest by a SkyWing patrol; we were looking for scavengers, because I was obsessed with those little things at the time...still am, just haven't had the time to pursue that hobby lately. He told me to go, that he didn't want me to get hurt. The SkyWings must've only wanted him, because they didn't even bother chasing me. But I still left, like a big coward," he said, tears forming once again in his eyes. "It's all my fault he's gone...if I had just stayed and fought or something..."
He didn't finish that sentence.
"Winter, look at me," Moon said a little firmly. "It's not your fault at all. You couldn't have known there would be a patrol there. And if he wanted you to go, he just didn't want you to get hurt. He was looking out for you. If you hadn't listened...you'd be dead too, probably, and I don't want to think about that."
"I know he was just trying to protect me," Winter said, wiping his eyes again, "but I wish I would've done something, instead of running. I should've been brave.
"Sometimes, running away is the bravest thing you can do," Moon replied. "Having the sense to not fight when you know the odds are stacked in the enemy's favor...you probably saved your own life that day, by listening to your brother."
Winter didn't say anything, but he instead pulled her into a hug, laying his head on top of hers. She didn't need him to speak, or even to read his thoughts, because she knew what that meant: Thank you.

Alright, some of you early readers read the one part I'm not going to mention. Anyhow, I went back and deleted it; it was a

bit too much in my opinion.

❄Chapter 23: Abrupt Return❄

[image]

Sorry that this is getting out so late, I've been surprisingly busy so far this summer. That's all I have to say.

On the first night that the students returned to the academy, Mightyclaws disappeared.
Winter had woken to discover this news the second day they were back. Although he wasn't connected at all to Mightyclaws, all these disappearances had him shaken. He wasn't scared of being captured...or worse, but rather, he was afraid this might happen to Moon. Winter asked around during and between classes, mostly to dragons who slept near the missing NightWing, as well as a few who had been there when the other two dragons had gone missing: Bigtail and Mindreader. None of them remembered anything about it, besides the fact that the last thing they'd noticed was a thin veil of blue smoke.
By lunch time, everyone in the academy was bustling with this newfound disturbance. It seemed the school was going into some sort of panic with these three disappearances in such a short amount of time, and he couldn't blame anyone. However, he spoke to Moon about it privately during lunch, as the rest of their friends still didn't know about the prophecy she'd foretold.
Winter wasn't feeling hungry, his appetite soured by the worrying news. Moon felt the same, so they went out into the hallway to talk.
"What are we going to do about this?" she asked, her face stricken with fear and concern. "I'm the only NightWing left in the academy, and the dragon behind all this is only going after my tribe...I'm really scared, Winter."
He nodded, completely understanding. "I talked to a few dragons this morning about all the disappearances," he said quietly. "It seems that blue smoke stuff kind of...puts dragons to sleep when they breathe it in. That's the last thing any of them remember about the nights those dragons went missing. Whoever's doing this must

kidnap them while anyone nearby is unconscious, and they've got to be taking them somewhere." He winced, as his words only seemed to put Moon more on-edge. "Don't worry...I won't let anything bad happen to you," he said, giving her a hug. "I've never let it happen before, and I'm not going to start now."

She looked up at him with tear-filled eyes. "But what if you're not able to? You said the smoke is what renders everyone unconscious, so how would you be able to help?"

"I'd find a way," he replied simply. "I always do."

Moon just rested her head on his shoulder, her tears forming little pools on his icy scales. "How did I get so lucky to find you?"

"I think you have a little thing called fate to thank for that," Winter said, doing his best to wipe the tears from her eyes.

For some reason, there was an impossibly white IceWing walking the halls, someone Winter didn't recall seeing here. That was strange; with only thirty students here at the beginning, he was sure he'd ran into everyone by now...he couldn't quite see their face, as they were walking away from him and Moon, but the way they walked seemed oddly familiar.

"Nobody wants to see that, lovebirds," the male called as he walked off. "Especially not from an IceWing and one of those pathetic excuses for a dragon."

That sparked a fire inside Winter that he'd felt before, when something - or sometimes, like now, some*one* - made him as furious as he could ever be. He turned around to glare daggers at the ill-mannered IceWing, but they were still facing the opposite direction. Strangely though, they'd stopped, as if they knew he was about to respond.

"Oh, piss off, you scumbag," he snapped. "Go find something else to fill the gaping hole in your heart."

The male just laughed, but not in a high-and-mighty way like he'd expected. It sounded like a genuine chuckle, but before Winter could investigate this out-of-place dragon any further, they turned and disappeared around the corner of the hallway.

"What...was that about?" Moon asked after a few moments.

"To be honest..." he said, still looking at where this mystery dragon had been, "I have no clue."

(One week later. 11:48 PM. Front entrance to Jade Mountain Academy)

Two dragons were standing side-by-side under the cover of dark clouds, huddled in conversation. Both were from similar tribes, however one was slightly different, and the other had concealed his identity from the world using the hollowed-out skull of a NightWing; his tribe's worst enemy. Even his most trusted partner, the dragon who was speaking with him now, didn't know who he was. Over the years, he'd learned he could only fully trust himself, and he wasn't about to break that mindset. It was the only one he knew was still part of what he'd used to be.

"I presume you've taken care of everything?" he asked quietly, keeping an eye out for one of the guards that had been appointed to patrol this place at night. They wouldn't be a problem as long as they could be...silenced if one spotted the two. It was the Midnight Marauders he really had to worry about...one of them in particular seemed like a strong combatant that he might not be entirely prepared to face.

The smaller dragon nodded. "I got my claws on some inside information that the NightWing's winglet is planning on ambushing you. Seems they're convinced you're going to attack tonight. Might I suggest we wait another week or so?"

He fixed a steeled glare on them. "That's another week for them to heighten security, or for the last NightWing to decide to drop out of school. I'm going to strike *tonight*...I need to send a message to everyone in Pyrrhia that NightWings are a mistake that is going to be eradicated one way or a another...once I take care of her, the news will spread throughout the continent. I'm going to make sure that future generations will remember the day that my tribe ended this futile war between us and those volcano-crawlers once and for all. And why, may I ask, are you covered in black paint?"

"My job was to provide you with information, not include you in the details of my personal life," They hissed, suddenly acting hostile and defensive.

The skull-wearing dragon shrugged. "Fair enough."

Without another word, he slipped inside the academy, knowing he would stop at nothing to kill this NightWing.

(Midnight. Winter and Moon's sleeping cave)

Winter sat vigilantly on his ledge, back turned to the rest of the world as he waited. Waited for whoever was responsible for all these wretched attacks to show themselves. They'd been capturing

NightWings about every week, and the time since Mightyclaws disappeared now matched that. The dragons behind all this was clearly smart and knew what they were doing; otherwise they would've been caught long ago. For that reason, there was no point in trying to hide himself, as they would be expecting him to do that. However, they probably wouldn't be predicting for five other dragons to be lying in wait just ten feet above their heads.
The rest of their winglet had agreed to protect Moon alongside him, and they were here to do just that. They all clung to the roof of the cave, Kinkajou wearing a gray, rock-like pattern on her scales, while the rest of the, had covered themselves in black paint to blend in with the darkness as much as possible.
The minutes ticked by in agonizing silence, and after awhile, he began to wonder if they were all being paranoid and losing sleep for nothing.
Just as the thought crossed his mind, his sharp ears picked up a faint metallic rattling, growing closer to the cave. He turned around for just a moment, and saw some sort of round canister roll inside, before blue smoke began leaking from the object with a continuous hissing noise. Then, just a few moments later, came the several thuds of his fellow dragons dropping to the ground from the roof, unconscious.
Panic filling his chest, he glanced over at Moon's form on her bed through the smoke, and judging by how she hadn't stirred at all, he determined the same fate must've befallen her. Besides the whole 'falling from the ceiling' thing, of course.
He heard quiet, stealthy footsteps creep into the cave, before he turned back around, trying to act like the smoke had put him under as well, slowly forming a dagger with his frostbreath all the while.
"Idiots," a deep, male voice growled, most likely saying this as he stepped over the bodies of Winter's friends. "I thought they would've pieced together that the smoke puts everyone but me asleep by now...guess they were more shallow than I thought." Their voice was shockingly close now. "Especially you."
Winter swallowed the lump in his throat, feeling himself shaking head to tail.
Does he have a weapon? If so, there's nothing stopping him from killing me right now...he HAS to know I'm faking, so why doesn't he just kill me, rather than risk me leaking what I've already witnessed to the entire continent? But his voice...it sounds so familiar...do I know him? Is that

why he hasn't killed me?
"Quit faking, simpleton!" the familiar-sounding dragon snarled. "I've got a knife here, and so help me, I'll use it if..."
That gave Winter the only excuse he needed to attack this not-quite-stranger. He rolled off of his ledge, then jumped up and sank his ice-dagger into the male's shoulder without losing momentum.
The dragon who he could now identify as an IceWing let out a scream of pain, stumbling away as they ripped the shards of ice from their scales. The damage Winter did only seemed to infuriate him, though, as he leapt at him fast enough to catch him off-guard and knock him off his feet. Winter barely stopped the silver blade from embedding into his throat in time, managing to grab his attacker's talons and stop them before they could move any further.
"Why aren't you passed out?" the somewhat familiar dragon asked, his voice faltering with the struggle both of them were now locked in. "Nobody has resisted the smoke before...not even..."
"You...tell me..." Winter said, his strength fading as he had to exert so much of it into holding their knife at bay. "Why are you even..." he trailed off for a second, kicking the larger dragon off of him, "doing any of this?"
The male landed on top of Turtle, and Winter realized he had to take this fight out into the halls before somebody not directly involved got hurt. Before they could get up, he pounced on them with enough force to send them both tumbling into the space occupied by all three winglet caves. He noticed that the air here was thick with the smoke as well, so nobody would be conscious to hear or see any of this at the moment. Wonderful.
Winter was thrown off in seconds, and fell against one of the stone walls. He dropped to the ground and darted away as the white dragon came at him, his knife held in his talons once again. He wondered if this was the IceWing he'd noticed in the hallway a week ago, the one he'd never seen here before...
He quickly created a shard of ice with his frostbreath, then hurled it at his opponent's back while they got their bearings. It connected with a wet THUNK, and they produced another wail of agony as blood began flowing from the fresh wound, joining the stream of blue liquid running down their back from the injury on their shoulder.
"I'm doing this because NightWings are an abomination to society!" he shot back, throwing his dagger at Winter's face. He dodged it,

and based on how deep it sank into the wall, knew his face would no longer exist had it hit. "I have no clue how you can have feelings for one, but it clearly means there's something wrong with you."
"Says the MANIAC TRYING TO KILL ME!" Winter yelled, hoping to draw some attention, if anyone in the vicinity was still awake to hear. "And now you've been stalking me as well. What's next, are you gonna start wearing NightWing scales as a cape?"
They leapt at him once again, and he got out of the way once more, but they attempted to remove their dagger from the wall rather than attack him again. "I was actually thinking about that already...anyway, you're an IceWing like me! We're supposed to hate their kind! So why don't you?"
"Because I've seen one for who she really is, rather than make my decision of whether to like her or not based on appearance alone. Sure, some of them are jerks, but there are plenty of dragons from other tribes that can be equally horrible."
The male gave up on dislodging his weapon, but he'd tried to do so for too long, as it gave Winter a chance to attack. A chance he took. He charged at this strange dragon on all fours, then jumped up and slammed his face into the wall. There was the CRACK of bone splitting, but it turned out to be the helmet made out of NightWing skull that took the brunt of the damage. Sure it was as morbid as could be, but it was useful for that purpose.
His foe finally seemed to submit, sinking to the floor with his back against the wall, looking down at the ground in shame. Oddly enough, he chuckled a little bit, his bleeding mouth forming a grin that despite the current situation, seemed warm and inviting.
"You always were a stubborn little guy...always took yourself seriously, never gave up..." he muttered. "I guess that's something I never learned to do..."
"Who are you?" Winter asked menacingly, creating a sword of sorts with his frostbreath and pointing the dangerous end at the defeated IceWing.
"And that...I'm not going to even ask how you learned to do that..."
The dragon with scales as white as snow finally looked up, a large fragment of his mask having broken off, leaving Winter with a sufficient look at his face to realize who this really was.
Winter dropped his weapon in shock, his mind trying to piece together how it could be possible that he was seeing who he was. Did his eyes deceive him? Or was it real, in a horrible kind of way?

"Hailstorm?"

❄ Chapter 24: Broken Brother ❄

Winter was speechless. All these years, he and the rest of his tribe had lived by the fact that Hailstorm was dead. Killed. Tortured, or forced to fight in Ex-Queen Scarlet's gruesome arena until he could fight no more. Yet here he was, staring into his brother's eyes, eyes just a bit less blue than his own.

"How?" was all he could manage to say, his mind wracked with a million thoughts. Suddenly, all his other worries seemed so distant, even those of his unconscious clawmates.

"Hailstorm..." his brother said, acting like it was a word from some foreign language. "I don't even remember the last time someone called me by that name...must've been years..."

Winter was perplexed. "What do you mean?"

"You all thought I was dead until now, right?" Hailstorm asked. "Honestly, I'd rather be that than what I am now..."

He waited for an explanation, but his brother seemed like his mind was occupied by something far-off.

"Hailstorm, can you just...explain how you're even breathing?"

The larger IceWing narrowed his eyes at him. "I use my lungs. Like every other oxygen-breathing organism on the planet."

It didn't seem like he was joking.

"No, I mean...how are you alive?!" Winter finally said. "I thought the SkyWings killed you. Everyone did."

Hailstorm closed his eyes, taking off his morbid helmet and rubbing his temples. "I can't exactly remember...all I know, is I was a SkyWing for awhile...Pyrite, they called me...I...those patrol dragons that captured me, they took me to Scarlet's throne room, and there was this other guy there too...I'm not sure if he was a NightWing or a SkyWing..." His brother trailed off, seemingly trying to gather his memories. "But he put this necklace thing on me. It had a tiny black pouch attached to it, and there was a piece of paper inside...I figured out it was some kind of enchantment,

probably Animus magic, and it turned me into a female SkyWing named Pyrite. Yeah, I kinda remember now..."

Winter looked at Hailstorm's neck. There was no such pouch there now.

"That guy...I'm pretty sure he was the one with the magic. He had a bunch of different forms he could turn into...like different tribes..." the white IceWing said, shutting his eyes again. "Once I figured out what he'd done to me...I killed that bastard...I took off the pouch and burned it and the piece of paper, so nobody could ever use it like he did again...but I was Pyrite for so long that it messed up my head...like I'll go to use fire and then remember that I only have frostbreath now...the fire was the best part of being a SkyWing...all I remember about being an IceWing besides the obvious, is that we hate NightWings. We loathe them, it's been that way for centuries...right? Or am I thinking of something else?"

"No, you're right...at least for the majority of IceWings," Winter said. "I'm probably the only one who doesn't hate them, or at least the only one who'll willingly admit it. The rest of them just don't get it, and I don't think they ever will...but is that way you've been going on these kidnap-sprees?"

Hailstorm nodded. "It seemed like what I was supposed to do...I have no idea what else I should be doing besides, killing NightWings..."

He really doesn't remember anything...does he remember Icicle? Our parents?

"You were one of the most popular dragons in the Ice Kingdom before you got captured," Winter said carefully, not sure how his brother might react. It seemed his mind had broken, cracked like an egg from all the confusion, the lies. "Remember the ranks? You were close to the top. Like second or third out of the entire kingdom, I think."

"The ranks?" Hailstorm asked. "Oh, I remember...god, I HATED the ranks!" he roared, jumping up and suddenly pacing in a circle. "It's all one big popularity contest, to see who's the best at such and such AND ALL FOR NO DAMN REASON!"

Winter was shocked. "But, why would you hate them? You were nearly perfect at everything the ranks were based off of. You're the only one our parents ever cared much about, for that reason. I mean, Icicle too, because she's meant to be the queen eventually...I don't even think I've seen her much since winter break..."

"Icicle? Our sister? The queen?" Hailstorm asked, stopping in his tracks.

"Well not yet, but she's supposed to be, eventually, at least if all goes according to plan...but why did you hate the ranks so much if you were so good at them?"

"The pressure," his older brother replied. "Mom and dad were always cracking down on me, even more than either of you, probably."

So he does remember our family.

"It's not easy being perfect at almost everything our tribe wants you to be, Winter. Once they realize your potential, all they want you to do is keep the streak going, and nothing was ever enough for them. 'Mom, I killed two polar bears in hunting today!' 'Well next time get three.' 'Dad, I held my breath during swimming for FIVE MINUTES!' 'Make it ten next time..." Hailstorm sighed. "Don't you get it? You weren't the only one they were constantly bugging to be better...seems like nobody is safe from that in the Ice Kingdom, and that's why I'm never going back."

Winter was as surprised as he'd been in awhile. He'd always thought Hailstorm had it easy, being so good at everything an IceWing was supposed to be good at...but it turned out that he'd had it worse than anybody he knew.

"Well I can't go back, either," he told Hailstorm. "Dad caught me writing letters to one of my friends over break, and tried to kill me for it...I had to fight back, and I knocked him out cold, probably gave him a concussion...if I go back, I'll get killed on the spot, whereas they'll throw a damn parade for you if you went back..."

Hailstorm didn't reply, looking up at the rapidly dissipating smoke. "I have to go...but not before I finish what I came here to do..." he produced another knife out of nowhere, then started heading back to Winter's cave.

"No!" Winter roared, tackling his brother from behind.

"What are you...doing?!" Hailstorm said, kicking him off. "You're my brother, you should be HELPING me!"

Winter got back up, brushing himself off. "Well if this is what it means to help family...help them take the life of an innocent dragon..." he formed a dagger with his frostbreath, stalking toward his brother. "I want no part of it."

Hailstorm seemed shocked, but only for a moment. He quickly masked his emotions with one of anger, like Winter found himself

doing too often. "If you're just going to get in my way, Winter...maybe we were never family to begin with."

Winter feared his brother was going to charge right back into the cave in a last attempt to kill Moon, and while he did go back in, he leapt out the window with a crash, the glass splintering as he disappeared into the night, leaving Winter to collapse on the floor and silently cry, grieving for the old Hailstorm that was long dead, replaced by a cold-hearted killer he could hardly recognize.

I know Shapeshifter was never killed in the WoF series, but this is fan fiction, I can do what I want with it. Peace.

●Chapter 25: A Horrid Discovery●

Moonwatcher slowly brought herself back to reality, embarrassed at what fools they'd all been to forget about the smoke. She blinked rapidly to clear her foggy eyes, and, feeling pressure on top of her, looked up to find that Karma had fallen on top of her when everyone had been knocked out by the smoke. But, if that were really the case, why wasn't she locked up somewhere, imprisoned by whoever had started this madness? Or worse? And...had Karma been there before all that happened? She couldn't remember much of anything that had happened before she'd fallen asleep, and it seemed that the smoke did that to everyone it affected.
Moon squirmed her way out from underneath the hybrid, blackened from the paint. She and Winter were the only two who hadn't painted themselves. Looking at the slumped, but still alive, dragons on the floor, it was clear she was the only one awake so far.
Where did Winter go? He was on his ledge, and now he's not here... she thought, feeling a mild panic set in. Then she heard faint sobbing coming from the area where all three winglet caves were located.
Could THAT be him?
To her surprise, she walked out of their cave and found him huddled in an icy ball on the floor, his back legs tucked up to his chest and his wings wrapped around most of his body.
Moon walked over to him, her heart breaking as she could see him shuddering from the force of his sobs. What could've made him this upset?
"Winter?" she asked hesitantly. "What's wrong?"
His wings parted slightly to reveal angry, tear-stained eyes. He didn't seem angry with her, though, but rather with someone else.
"Everything, pretty much. I...I'll explain once everybody wakes up. It was almost too much for my brain to handle, so I'm not even sure if you could..." he trailed off as she narrowed her eyes at him.
"Finish that sentence, Winter," she said with an edge to her voice.
"I'm not sure if you could keep the information to yourself before I got a chance to tell them," the icy dragon added, chuckling

nervously.
"Mhm..." Moon replied. "Come on, let's go back insi...what happened to the window?!" she shouted.
"Like I said, I'll explain," he told her, getting up and wiping his eyes as Moon went back into their cave, wondering just what could've gone down while she was out.

"So lemme get this straight," Qibli said amongst the chatter of all seven dragons in their winglet huddled together in the sleeping cave, "you have an older brother who's supposed to be dead but he's not, he was turned into a SkyWing by some sort of Animus spell-slinger, he figured out what that guy had done to him and killed him, and now the only thing he remembers about himself is that he hates NightWings."
"Correct," Winter confirmed.
"And that's why he's been kidnapping all these NightWings?" Kinkajou asked.
"Mhm."
"This makes my head hurt..." Turtle said, rubbing his temples.
No surprise there, Winter's mind spat.
Moon could tell he didn't like the green SeaWing, but had never gotten around to asking why. She wasn't all that comfortable around him either; he'd seemed a little too relieved once he'd found out his secrets were safe from her powers. Now wasn't the time or place to ponder that, though. There were more important things that took priority.
"I'm still kinda confused too, but I think I get it," the small NightWing said.
Karma stepped a little closer to Winter, raising jealousy flags all throughout Moonwatcher's brain. She resisted the urge to tackle the hybrid, mostly because it wasn't morally right to hurt someone with a disability. And also because that would be overreacting.
"I can't imagine what you're going through right now," Karma said to Winter in a tone Moon wasn't fond of. "If you ever need to talk to someone about this, we're all here to help."
Thankfully, Winter stepped away from her with an irritated scowl. "I'm fine, Karma."
"Yeah, quit flirting with Winter!" Sparrow teased the hybrid.
Karma blushed furiously. "I'd better go," she said abruptly, quickly following though on her words, muttering something about washing

the black paint off herself as she went.
The atmosphere grew awkward and heavy for a few moments, until Qibli broke the silence.
"So much for everyone being here to help," he said with a smirk.
That got a good laugh out of almost everyone, even Winter. The only dragon who didn't was Moon.
Karma better not try anything with Winter...I know she likes him, but she's not crazy enough to try and make a move on him behind my back, or at all. Right?
"So, what are you guys going to do about the window?" Kinkajou asked.
Moon glanced at Winter, and he looked at her as well for a few seconds.
"Maybe we could patch it up with some leaves," Moon suggested.
"Yeah, but that could tear easily when it gets windy. I could try and use my frostbreath," he replied.
"But then it would get too cold in here," she said.
Sparrow gasped. "This might be your first big argument!" she exclaimed.
They both looked at her questioningly.
"It's just a window," Moon said.
"Yeah, it's not that big a deal," Winter agreed.
"Every couple has some kind of big argument at some point," Sparrow informed them. "Trust me, I know. This is probably gonna end in one or both of you storming out of the room in anger as you struggle to find a solution to meet halfway with."
Winter just rolled his eyes. "Please. How bad could it get? It's *one* window."

"Frostbreath is way more sturdy and durable then a couple layers of leaves!" Winter said. "Plus, I can shape the piece perfectly with my new ability."
Moon scoffed. "Oh there you go again talking about your precious ice power! It'll melt when it gets hot!" Their friends had all left about an hour ago, and they were still yet to make a decision on how to repair the shattered window.
"Not if I make it three inches thick! Plus, it won't be that hot until June, and by then we'll be done with the school year."
"The window frame can't support three inches of ice!" Moon argued. "The glass was like one inch thick before your stupid brother went

and broke it!"
"You don't even know him!"
"Who, the insane IceWing trying to kill me and do who-knows-what after that?!"
"He was better before!" Winter shot back. "Before all this!"
"I doubt it..." she mumbled.
Winter glared at her with that piercing gaze of his. She'd seen him do the same to other dragons countless times before, but had never been on the receiving end of it herself. It was kinda terrifying, if she was being completely honest.
"Tell me you didn't just say that."
"Say what? That your genocidal brother has more than a couple screws loose?"
Winter didn't reply, but she could tell she'd pushed it too far by the way he was breathing deeply, his nostrils flaring in anger as he picked up a few shards of broken glass on the floor, silently fuming.
"Ah, shi...for the love of Pyrrhia..." he growled, having cut his palm on one of the pieces of glass. Moon was about to help him, but then he practically exploded, hurling the glass at the wall where it burst into even more tiny fragments, then punching the wall with his non-injured fist and muttering what were most likely obscene curse words under his breath, before he stomped out of the cave in a fit of rage, leaving icy footprints in his wake.
Moon saw Sparrow peek at her from the hallway, mouthing the words "I told you so," before she went back inside her own cave.
Normally, Moon would've followed Winter, but given the argument they'd just had and that she'd provoked his recent acts of fury, she decided against it and instead picked up the remaining pieces of glass and disposing of them, her falling tears as transparent as the broken fragments that she tossed outside.
I feel horrible...I shouldn't have said that stuff about his brother right after everything that he's been through...he had to fight his closest family member, for moons' sake...I'd better just let him work out his anger on his own. He'll be back in an hour or two, I bet. I hope.

The icy dragon she'd come to love didn't return to their cave until nightfall, and by then she was beginning to think maybe he wouldn't come back until the next day, if at all. What she'd said must've really hurt for him to be gone as long as he was, but she was thrilled when he quietly walked into the cave.

It was pitch black, even though it was only eight o' clock, but that was normal for this time of year. Winter clearly thought she was asleep, because he jumped with a girlish shriek when she hopped up and embraced him in her wings.
"I'm so sorry," she apologized between body-shaking laughs.
"It wasn't that funny..." he said sheepishly.
"Yes it was," Moon replied, wiping tears that resulted from the laughter out of her eyes. She thought she was done for a moment, but then a whole new bout of giggles struck her, and she ended up laughing so hard she let go of Winter by accident and fell back on the floor.
"What's so funny that it had to interrupt my beauty sleep?" Qibli's tired voice came as he entered the room, walking over to Winter's ledge and rotating the moon globe so it illuminated most of the cave.
"I think I better question is, what the hell is on your face?" Winter asked the SandWing, falling victim to a round of laughter himself. Moon cleared her eyes enough to see that his face was covered in a green paste of some sort, a cucumber slice over one of his eyes, the other seeming like it slid down his face, as it was a few inches below his eye. The ridiculous sight only stirred up more laughter from Moon, and before she knew it, the rest of their winglet was in the cave, wondering what all the ruckus was.
"Why is it that whenever something disturbs the peace here, it always comes from your guys' cave?" Turtle complained, before he saw Qibli and began laughing along with Moon and Winter. Soon, everyone else was laughing too, besides the blushing SandWing.
"What? It helps me moisturize," Qibli said, eating one of the cucumber slices. He suddenly covered his snout, a disgusted look on his green face. "Okay, who farted? Fess up."
"Wasn't me," Moon said, finally done with her obnoxious amount of laughter.
"Me neither," Sparrow added.
It was eventually determined that none of them passed any gas, which left them all wondering what the stench was.
"Whatever it is, it reeks to high heaven," Qibli said, pinching his nostrils shut. "I think it's coming from outside."
"Well we can't close the window, so we might as well check it out and see if we can get rid of it," Winter said, climbing out through the window frame. Their window opened onto an outcrop on the

mountain, like a cliff, but more sturdy.
Moon remembered with a start the glass shards she'd dumped out there. "Careful of the-" she said, not able to finish in time before he landed on the ground, a howl of pain slicing through the still night air. "Glass shards..."
She looked outside to see him picking glass out of his back feet, several bleeding cuts on each foot.

Moon climbed out and cleared away the glass with a few sweeps of her tail and took a look at the cuts. "Sorry, I didn't know you were just gonna hop out the window like that..."

A flash of light caught her eye, and she noticed some kind of handle sticking up out of the dirt, it's rusted exterior glinting in the moonlight. Winter seemed okay for the most part, so she crawled over to investigate the abnormality. It was clearly attached to something, and as she cleared away a loose pile of leaves and dirt, she discovered a metal hatch that seemed large enough for a single dragon to fit through, cold to the touch.

"Have you found what's emitting that awful aroma?" Qibli called from inside.

"No," Moon said, turning her head so her voice would carry, but keeping her eyes trained in the hatch. "But I think I found something much more important."

"What? I gotta see this..." Winter said, crawling over as well. "Hm...strange. I wonder if it goes anywhere..."

"No Winter, someone just put a hatch suspiciously large enough to fit a dragon in the ground that doesn't go anywhere," Qibli said, hoisting himself outside as well, followed by the others.

"Oh, shut your trap, makeup-face," the ice blue dragon spat.

"It's MOISTURIZER!"

"Both of you be quiet!" Kinkajou snapped. "Let's get this over with so I can go back to sleep."

Moon rarely saw the snappish side of the tiny RainWing, but she didn't waste valuable time thinking about that. A mixture of pure curiosity and also the desire to get all of this wrapped up, like Kinkajou said, pushed her to open the hatch. It was heavier than she'd expected, and she had to stand up and push back against the ground to make any progress on it. It didn't get her very far, though, so she locked her back talons around the handle and propelled herself upward with her wings until there was a gap so Winter could pry it open the rest of the way.

"Nice teamwork," Sparrow complimented.

All it took was one little breath for Moon to know that horrible smell was coming from whatever was at the bottom of a large tunnel underneath the hatch. It smelled like a combination of rotting meat and...something with a sort of edge to the smell. It smelled sour, but not like a lemon. Whatever it was, it certainly didn't please her sense of smell.

"Who's going in first?" Turtle asked.

"Not it!" Karma said, touching a claw to her snout. Everyone did the same, but Kinkajou ended up being the last to do so.

"Aw, come on..." she whined. "You guys suck sometimes," she said, before taking a deep breath, holding it, and disappearing into the darkness of the tunnel.

Moon waited a few moments, then realized she couldn't let a two-year-old go into some creepy, probably rat-infested hole in the ground all by herself. "I'm going with her," she announced, before reluctantly stepping into the tunnel as well.

"Me too," she heard Winter say. She heard a thud behind her, and felt safer knowing he was close by. Several more thuds indicated that the rest of the group followed suit, which made this feel a little less scary. But only a little. It was still very dark, and eerily quiet, and the smell was only getting more and more intense as they walked. After a few minutes, it even overpowered the smell of the dirt around them.

"Does anybody hear...snoring?" Sparrow asked from somewhere behind Moonwatcher.

She pricked her ears, and after focusing for long enough, she could confirm that she heard it too.

"Who would be sleeping down in this filthy, rancid place?" Winter asked.

"Someone with no sense of smell?" Qibli guessed.

There was a shrill gasp from up ahead, followed by the sound of vomiting. Kinkajou had to have seen something horrible to throw up almost immediately.

"Kinkajou?!" Moon asked, rushing ahead to see what was wrong. The light slowly grew brighter, but not much. She could see what was probably the end of the tunnel further ahead, but it was only illuminated by a few lanterns, it seemed, as it wasn't a whole lot brighter than the rest of the tunnel.

WARNING: IF YOU HAVE A WEAK STOMACH, I SUGGEST YOU

SKIP AHEAD WITH NARROWED EYES UNTIL YOU SEE BOLD AND CAPITALIZED TEXT LIKE THIS. THERE I WILL EXPLAIN THE HORRORS SOME OF YOU MAY READ IF YOU CHOOSE TO CONTINUE. I WILL PROBABLY HAVE A BIT OF TROUBLE WRITING THIS MYSELF. YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED.

Moon finally entered a medium-sized chamber, not much bigger than the sleeping caves in the academy. The stench was most pungent here, and she realized why with a horrified gasp, just like Kinkajou, who was ghostly white, a pile of vomit next to her as she stood open-mouthed, staring at the left wall with a look of pure terror.

On the wall hung the lifeless and brutally decimated bodies of the three NightWings who had been captured within the last two months: Bigtail, Mindreader, and Mightyclaws. They were unidentifiable, aside from Bigtail, but Moon honestly wished she didn't know who he was. A blood-soaked hook had been shoved through the back of his neck and came out through his open mouth, and his right talon had been severed at the wrist. As if in mockery, his tail had been cut off as well, resting below the gruesome sight on a bloodstained wooden table.

The second NightWing had a spear pinning them to the wall, shoved through their chest. It appeared their heart had been dug out, as the place where it should have been was empty, just a gaping cavity where it had been removed. It would've been bad enough to see the life-giving organ sitting below the carcass on the table, but instead it was gone, leaving Moon wondering what might've been done with it.

And the final NightWing was most likely Mightyclaws, as all his claws had been cut off, and were now strung on a morbid necklace sitting on the table below the hanging body. His throat had been torn open, and one of his eyes was gone, a limp optical nerve hanging out of the empty socket. His stomach had also been stabbed countless times with a pencil, and she knew this, for it was still stuck inside his abdomen. She remembered seeing him drawing often. This was probably some sick joke for that.

OKAY DON'T LOOK AT THE ABOVE FOUR PARAGRAPHS, IF YOU HAVE A WEAK STOMACH, THEY ARE PRETTY GORY. Anyway, basically the bodies of Mightyclaws, Bigtail, and Mindreader were all hung up on the wall of the chamber, and they were DEAD DEAD. Like, horror-movie dead. That's all you

gotta know. Not my fault if your imagination gives you a picture, that's your brain, not me.

There were several rounds of vomiting and gasps or screams from her companions as they each saw the horrible sight before them. Winter was definitely the most emotionally affected by all this, though, because it was clear who had done this when Moon saw them in the corner of the room, their claws stained with blood and eyes wild with anger and fright.

A pure white IceWing - aside from the blood - bigger than Winter. Just as he had described them over twelve hours ago after they'd all woken up from the smoke produced by this very dragon.

Hailstorm.

❄Chapter 26: Fractured❄

Everything happened so fast, Winter could hardly process it all at once. First he walked into the small, poorly illuminated chamber underground, seeing the horrific mess of bodies hung on the wall, as if it was a good thing they were dead...although, to the culprit of this sickening crime, his brother, it WAS an accomplishment.
As his friends gasped, screamed, or vomited all around him, Winter silently stared into Hailstorm's eyes, feeling the cold realization of what all of this meant. In this moment, his entire view on his once proud, happy-go-lucky brother changed forever. He no longer saw him as family, but rather as an enemy. A criminal. A psychopath.
Before he could do anything, say anything, Hailstorm threw something at the dirt below him. The object exploded immediately with a flash of light and a cloud of smoke, but it didn't prevent Winter from hearing his brother's heavy footsteps and frantic breathing as he ran out into the tunnel they'd all come in through.
"We can't let him get away!" Winter shouted to his companions through the smoke, already having figured out which way the tunnel was. He broke out in a dead sprint on all fours after Hailstorm, refusing to let him escape into the world and kill more innocent NightWings.
Never thought that one day I'd be chasing after my brother with the intents of hurting him if I have to...I don't want it to come to that, but I'll do what must be done, no matter what.
The tunnel went by much faster when he was running, so the smoke didn't affect him for long. Within moments after leaving the gory chamber, he was able to make out the shape of his brother keeping just ahead of him, running on all fours as well. Winter didn't want to risk slowing down to try and snag the end of Hailstorm's tail, because if he missed, it would be over.
The muscly white dragon raised his wings up and dragged them through the dirt on the roof of the tunnel, sending dust particles and pebbles into Winter's face as a desperate attempt at a distraction. Winter refused to stop, even though his eyes stung like lemon juice had been squeezed into them.
It didn't take long for them to breach the surface. Hailstorm had

picked up speed as they'd gotten closer, and he reached the hatch several seconds before him, scaling the dirt walls like it was nothing. The hatch had been left open, which gave Winter's brother yet another advantage. Still, he kept running, the terrible image of those dead NightWings mounted on the wall, their blood spattered on the floor stuck in his head like glue.

He reached the hatch as well after what seemed like eons, especially thankful for his serrated claws as he leapt onto the wall of dirt leading up to it and climbed his way up just as quickly as Hailstorm had. He wasn't prepared, though, for his brother to try and slam the hatch down on his face as he emerged from the ground, expecting him to be flying or running still. Winter pushed against the wall of dirt with his back legs, keeping the hatch from shutting with his forearms. He could just barely see his brother's shocked expression through the gap, and they both kept pushing against their sides of the square metal plate with all their might, until Winter finally managed to push off the wall with his legs and break the grapple. He heard the hatch slam into something - probably Hailstorm - as it flew open, and he almost lost his balance as he landed on the grass above.

Sure enough, he looked over, and a few feet away was his brother, sitting up and rubbing his jaw from where the hatch must've hit his face. Hailstorm met his gaze with his own fiery glare, then uprighted himself and took to the sky, Winter jumping up and following him immediately.

The white dragon looked behind him for a moment, then shot another scowl his way when he realized he was still being followed.

"Just leave me alone for once, Winter! Let me go and neither of us will have to get hurt!"

"I can't let you do that!" Winter replied, beating his wings harder than he thought physically possible. "What you did to those innocent dragons...it's not right, not in any way. If I let you get away, you'll just do the same thing in other places!"

"Well then, I'm sorry in advance, brother," Hailstorm growled.

Winter shot a glance over his shoulder, and was astonished to see how far they'd flown from the Academy. It had to be at least half a mile behind them. Five of the other dragons in his winglet were following them as well, Sparrow being the closest with her massive wings that propelled her through the night sky faster than any of the others. In fact, she was gaining on both of them pretty quickly.

He didn't know what Karma was going to do with her limp wing that always hung at her side, but then he looked down and saw that she was still pursuing, just from the ground. She was significantly far behind, but was racing around and over obstacles with incredible ease.
Winter flew after his brother for a solid five minutes before he started to tire. He had more adrenaline racing through him than some dragons probably would in their entire life, but one could only fly this fast for so long. He noticed the same thing happening to Hailstorm, but his brother showed no sign of stopping.
The ice blue dragon looked behind him once more and saw Sparrow flying at full force, seeming to be heading for Hailstorm.
She's not crazy enough to attack him...wait, none of them know how good of a fighter my brother is, so she probably is going to try to do that! he thought with a start.
"Sparrow, don't!" he shouted. "You don't know what he's capable of!"
The red SkyWing either didn't hear him or disregarded the warning, as she just flew even faster until she was matching Hailstorm's speed. Winter tried to speed up and get her to stop, but it was no use. He simply couldn't go any faster. But, there was another way, and although it could hurt both of the dragons in front of him if he wasn't careful, it was the only chance he had.
He aimed carefully, then shot a blast of frostbreath between the two of them, hoping she would get the hint and back off. However, all it did was make things worse.
Sparrow got distracted by the blast and wasn't prepared when Hailstorm lunged at her through the air and locked his claws around one of her wings, twisting it with a sickening SNAP. Winter watched, filled with horror as the female's eyes went wide and she plummeted down with a scream, knowing his expression was probably the same mask of fear. He forced himself to look away as she grew closer to the ground, and then her scream abruptly cut off. Without a doubt, she had fallen to her death. And it might not have happened if Winter hadn't distracted her. He suddenly remembered something Argo had told everyone during training lessons toward the beginning of the school year: *'A flightless dragon is a dead dragon.'*
Winter finally stopped flying, his body forcing him to halt and catch his breath. A feeling like someone had set one hundred pounds of

weight on his chest spread throughout him as his friends caught up to him, their eyes as wide as Sparrow's had been just a few painful moments ago.
I got her killed...this is my fault, Winter thought, tears coming to his eyes. *My fault, my fault, ALL MY FAULT...*
"I swear I didn't mean for that to happen," he said to the group of distraught dragons through two waterfalls of tears steaming from his eyes. "I tried to get her to back off, because I knew he wouldn't care if she was dead, but she didn't listen..."
Kinkajou was already sobbing, her scales a sad mix of gray and blue swirls as she flew down to where Sparrow landed. Winter knew she was never going to forgive him for this, no matter if he meant to do that or not. They'd been best friends, and now...
None of his friends said a word to him, most of them not even making eye contact with him as they flew down to console the grieving RainWing. They left one by one, until it was just him and Moon. It hurt the worst when she left, probably because she stared right at him, like she could see into his soul before she departed to go join the rest of them.
Winter watched her leave, seeing that Karma was already down there as well, on a grassy clearing where the red, crumpled body of Sparrow now lay.
"What have I done?" he mumbled, more tears flowing from his eyes. He wanted to rip his skull open out of frustration and grief. That way Moon had looked at him, her eyes practically speaking for her, like they were saying 'How can I ever love you again when you got one of our friends killed?'
What if she never talked to him again? What if none of them did? He would've tried to catch Sparrow or something, but he'd tired himself out too much to be able to help in any way. Had he just torn apart his relationship with Moon and everyone else in the matter of a few moments?
Winter was about to go land with everyone else, even if none of them wanted him too, when an white, icy blur slammed into him from above. He didn't have to see the IceWing's face to know it was Hailstorm, claws locked around his throat, the intent to kill evident as the wind rushed around them like a current. His immediate instinct was to use his frostbreath, but his brother was a step ahead.
"Nope," Hailstorm said, clamping on set of claws around his snout and holding it shut. "None of that, Winter."

*Screw your good fighting skills...*Winter thought, before he slammed a fist into Hailstorm's face. It was enough to escape from his brother's strong clutches and regain control in the dark night sky, slowing himself with his wings to the point where he wasn't desperately flailing about.

He dove down to the ground so he could get his bearings before Hailstorm could attack him yet again, his claws sinking into a muddy clearing. Tall pine trees surrounded the area, so he had no clue where the rest of his winglet was, or if they even knew where he was.

*They might not even help me after what happened to Sparrow...*he thought miserably whilst creating a dagger out of his frostbreath. *They're gonna hate me forever now, aren't they? There I go again, pushing everyone who cares about me away. Again.*

Within moments, Hailstorm glided down into the clearing, landing about ten feet away from Winter, a harsh glare on his face.

"Why can't you just let me have this?!" his brother roared. "It's all I know how to do anymore...I have nothing other than the fact that NightWings are the enemy and they need to be eradicated."

"Yes you do, Hailstorm," Winter said, dropping his dagger on the ground.

"Oh really? I can never go back home if I want to keep what little sanity I have left, and nobody is going to want to be around a killer," the white dragon said, tears in his eyes. "What could I possibly have left?"

"You have me and Icicle. And even after that horrible carnage we all saw in that little hideout of yours, we're still family." Winter stared his brother dead in the eyes. "We won't ever be able to look at you the same again, but nothing will ever change that we're family. So just stop this, Hailstorm. You can get help, you can be better, if you would just stop and listen."

He saw something flash in his brother's eyes. It looked like he might change his mind for a moment, but his expression returned to one of regret and hostility too quickly for that to be the case.

"I'm sorry, Winter," Hailstorm said, his voice faltering. "But I've gone too far to do that. And if you won't let me leave...I'm going to have to kill you."

That hurt Winter almost as much as seeing Moon fly away from him just a couple of minutes ago. His brother, the only family member who'd really been nice to him for years while the rest of

them were condescending jerks, was now going to do everything in his power to kill him. And that meant he would have to fight to the death.

"I thought that would be the case," Winter said, in a world of emotional hurt and physical exhaustion as he reluctantly picked up the ice dagger. "I didn't want it to come to this, but if it means putting an end to what you've done and avenging those poor dragons you slaughtered, then so be it."

The two brothers, once closer than could be, now ready to kill each other, stared silently at one another. Winter didn't want to make the first move, and he presumed Hailstorm felt the same, but one of them wouldn't be leaving here alive. And he planned for it to be his older brother.

There was a sudden crash of thunder from above. Winter looked up, seeing dark thunderheads taking over the sky, flashes of lightning coursing through them as it began to rain. After a few seconds, it became a downpour; not ideal conditions for a fight.

It turned out Hailstorm had been waiting for such a distraction, as he took his attention away from the sky just in time to see his brother flying straight at him, back talons outstretched like he was a bird of prey. And Winter was the prey.

He kept low to the ground as he dodged out of the way, feeling icy claws just barely graze his back as he steadied himself. Hailstorm immediately stopped after the miss and swung his tail around like a club, aimed directly for Winter's head. His fighting instincts taking over, he dropped his weapons and grabbed his brother's tail, yanking it downward and slamming him into the ground, mud splattering onto his chest with the impact.

Hailstorm got up on all fours, a streak of mud across his face like war paint, fangs bared in a snarl. Winter saw a soft blue glow at the back of his throat, and ducked as a jet of frostbreath sailed over his head. While he escaped what would've been a fatal blow, the icy substance collided with one of his wings and he gritted his teeth as subzero temperature spread across his wing until he couldn't feel it anymore. Thankfully it stopped at his wing.

Suddenly, a clump of mud was hurled at his face, and this time his brother didn't miss. As Winter blindly wiped at his eyes, he was shoved onto the ground, serrated claws digging into his chest. His brother said nothing, but he could feel a slight cold draft near his face, and knew he was about to use his frostbreath again. His eyes

partly cleared from the downpour, he saw his dagger sitting within arm's reach. He locked his claws around it, then with as much force as his exhausted body could handle, stabbed it into his brother's right side.

Hailstorm leapt away with a wail of pain, his serrated claws tearing away scales and bits of tissue from Winter's chest, leaving twenty tiny bleeding wounds on his abdomen. He knew he was going to lose this fight if he continued much longer; no matter what, his brother had always been a more skilled combatant than him, and it seemed that hadn't changed. Hailstorm was playing dirty, so he might as well do the same thing. Whatever it took to keep himself alive tonight.

The rain let up a little, but the mud was already very slick, meaning that if he slipped, it could prove to be a deadly mistake. Through the thin curtain of precipitation, he saw Hailstorm trying to remove the dagger, but it seemed to be in pretty deep. Too deep to remove.

Winter wiped the rest of the mud from his face, simultaneously creating a clean katana from his frostbreath and clenching it in his claws once he had finished. "Don't make me do this, Hailstorm!" he said, having to shout over the rain. Although his words were strong and threatening, deep down, he knew he could never kill his brother. He hoped Hailstorm wouldn't force him to do so, because if it came to that...he would never be able to look at himself in the mirror as anything but a cold-hearted killer.

Winter scanned his surroundings for a second, none of his friends - could he even call them that anymore? - in sight. Maybe they really weren't coming to help him.

He was tackled once again by his brother, making a mental note to stop taking his eyes off of him. Hailstorm's knee dug into his chest, squeezing most of the air out of his lungs. The white dragon spattered with mud, blood dripping from the wound on his side, grabbed Winter's sword and started forcing it close to his throat, the blade nearly pressing against his scales.

"I know you won't kill me, Winter," he hissed, hot saliva splattering onto his face. "You just don't have it in you. Never have, and never will. That's your greatest weakness, brother: you can't bring yourself to kill someone."

"Yes...I can..." Winter lied, grunting as he tried tried to push the katana away.

Hailstorm smirked. "Don't lie to me. I know you."
"That was years ago, Hailstorm," Winter said, desperately clawing at his brother's underbelly with his back talons. "I've changed."
"Obviously. The old Winter wouldn't be galavanting around with one of those smoke-breathers as a partner, or even a friend. The old Winter was so much stronger than you..." Hailstorm leaned closer to him. "And once I'm finished with you, I'm going to kill that little NightWing, and there's nothing you can do to stop me!"
Winter tried with all his might to fight back, but his weary body couldn't take this for much longer. He was going to be killed by his very own brother, with his very own weapon.
That is, he thought so until a pale yellow shape came sailing through the air and slammed into Hailstorm, launching him right off of Winter. He was too exhausted to do anything to stop Qibli, and he probably wouldn't have been able to; the SandWing clawed and bit at his brother like a shark in a feeding frenzy. He just lied there, his back definitely covered in mud, clutching his katana in his claws as he caught his breath.
If Qibli's here, where's everyone else? Winter thought. He looked to his right and got an answer, seeing the rest of the Jade Winglet emerge from the forest.
He looked back up at the sky, a few cracks of lightning splitting the air. Then, Moonwatcher's upside-down face came into view and he was pulled to his feet, before being locked in a tight hug by that very dragon.
"How did you all know where I was?" he asked, genuinely curious.
"Hailstorm attacked me as soon as you turned your backs and we ended up here."
"It wasn't that hard to hear you guys screaming at each other, you know," Moon said with a wry grin, her magnificent eyes filled with tears. She let go after a few seconds with an apologetic look. "I wish we could just hug like that forever, but we'd better stop Qibli before one of them gets killed."
Winter looked over at the tangled yellow and white mass writhing about, the occasional flash of green from Qibli's face. Turtle and Karma were already trying to break up the fight.
"Why is he so angry? I don't think I've ever seen him this mad..." Winter said, wiping some of the mud off his back.
Moon looked at him with a pained expression. "Didn't you ever think about why Carnelian didn't come out of the tunnel?"

"She didn't?" He hadn't even counted who left the chamber, too busy in refusing to let his brother escape at the time. "Oh..."
The NightWing standing next to him nodded sadly. "Hailstorm must've killed her on his way out. Qibli just sat there for so long, shaking her shoulders like she was asleep and he wanted her to wake up...it's the saddest thing I've seen...ever."
That explains why he's acting like such an animal... Winter realized, watching Qibli try to wrench the knife from Hailstorm's side. "Well it won't matter if my brother dies here...one way or another, he's going to. I can't let him live, after what he did to Bigtail, Mightyclaws...the other one that I can't remember the name of...I tried to convince him to come with us, that he could get better, like with therapy maybe, but he won't listen to anything I say..."
Moon put a paw on his shoulder. "It's alright, Winter. I'll make sure you don't have to do that..."
He was startled. "You mean...YOU'RE gonna try to kill him?"
"If I have to," she replied, a dark tone in her voice he'd never heard before.
"Please Moon, don't try to attack him..." he pleaded. "He'll kill you without a second thought."
She huffed. "I know, but I just can't stand to think about what he did to those poor souls back there...you can't justify that, no matter how you look at it."
A scream tore through the air, cutting their conversation short. Winter's head immediately whipped around to face the direction from where it came, and his rage only built more when he saw both Qibli and Kinkajou lying motionless on the ground. A dark pool of blood surrounded the SandWing, his throat cut open, while it looked like the tiny RainWing's neck had been snapped.
"No!" Moon shouted, tears pouring from her eyes. "Not them, too!"
Hailstorm's eyes were set on Turtle, and Winter knew what was about to happen if he didn't do something now. He ran toward his brother on all fours, just like when he'd been running after him through the tunnel probably about ten minutes ago. He wouldn't be able to get there fast enough, so he hurriedly formed a spear with his frostbreath and hurled it at the mostly white dragon. It sank into his shoulder just a moment too late to distract him, and Winter stopped dead in his tracks, hopelessly watching a blast of Hailstorm's own frostbreath collide with Turtle's chest and spread across him, the green SeaWing groaning in pain as he hit the

ground.
His heart was racing, but his mind was blank, besides the realization that three of his friends had been killed by his brother, one dying, who was supposed to be dead. If Hailstorm was dead, none of this would've happened...all those years of him wishing his brother would come back, to still be alive now seemed stupid. Because for the first time ever, he wished someone was dead, and that someone was Hailstorm. Winter glanced at Qibli's body, noticing with a bitter feeling that the dagger was resting in his open palm. He'd taken it out of his brother, then killed himself with it, not being able to live with the knowledge that Carnelian, the dragon he loved, was gone.
Winter watched as Hailstorm ripped the spear out of his shoulder, blood coating its broken tip. He heard the sound of talons pounding through wet mud, realizing with a pang of terror that Moon was charging toward him, with the intent to kill in the way she moved. He knew that look from watching her hunting, and he had to stop her.
He leaped up and flew in front of her, grabbing both her arms. "Moon, please don't do this! You don't know what he's capable of!"
"Oh really, Winter? I don't know that he'd coldheartedly killed almost everyone in our winglet?!" she screamed at him, trying to get out of his grasp. "Just let me try!"
"I can't!" he responded, glaring at her as if it would somehow convince her to calm down. Then, over the struggling NightWing's shoulder, he saw Karma, her eyes filled with tears, not doing a thing to help him. She hadn't even done anything to stop Hailstorm from brutally killing the rest of their friends, apart from Qibli, but he'd only killed himself because Hailstorm had murdered Carnelian, and Karma hadn't done a thing to stop that, either...
It was her. She'd been helping his insane, detrimental brother all along.
He was so taken aback by this realization that his grip on Moon slipped for a moment, and she wormed herself away from him, running straight at Hailstorm once more before he could stop her. Winter saw his brother hold her at arm's length, palm flat against her chest as she desperately tried to hurt him, flailing her arms and wings wildly like a kid throwing a tantrum. Hailstorm just smirked, and Winter got smacked in the jaw with the blunt end of the spear when he raced over to stop them, falling onto his back in the mud,

his vision going dark.
*I've failed all of them...*he thought, before he went unconscious.

Winter slowly came to, and the fact that he wasn't dead must've meant that he was only out for a few seconds. He felt the salty tang of blood in his mouth and trickling from it, a substance he'd seen far too much of in the last twenty minutes. He propped himself up on his elbows, his arctic blue eyes going wide with horror and despair when he saw Moon laying on her back on the ground, the dagger Qibli had killed himself with lodged in her chest. And she seemed to still be alive, but it was obvious by the way she was breathing that she was quickly dying.
"No..." Winter said, feeling steamy tears run down his face, a lump in his throat as he crawled over to the dying dragon. "Moon..."
Despite the pain she had to be experiencing right now, she smiled when she saw his face. "It's okay, Winter...it'll be okay."
"No...no it won't..." he sobbed, feeling like screaming as he lifted her head off the ground, cradling her in his arms. "This is my fault, everything that happened here...it's all my fault...I failed everyone."
Moonwatcher shook her head. "No, it's not...none of this is your fault."
"But, I got Sparrow killed, and-" he said, sniffling like a pathetic little kid, "and Carnelian, and Kinkajou, and Turtle..."
The small NightWing placed a shaky paw on the side of his face. "You did everything you could to help, Winter. You tried to stop Sparrow...and me...we were the ones who didn't listen, too wrapped up in our anger...honestly, I'm kind of surprised the same thing didn't happen to you."
'Never let your anger control you in a fight,' Argo's voice rang in his mind. *'That's how mistakes are made.'* He was right.
Moon coughed up a little bit of blood, and Winter knew her time was almost up. "I love you, Winter," she croaked, coughing again.
"I love you too," he said, choking on his words before he kissed her one last time. By the time they parted, she was already gone, her green eyes pale and without emotion.
Winter suddenly knew how Qibli had felt when Carnelian died. He tried to convince himself that she wasn't dead, that none of this was happening and it was all just one big, horrible nightmare. However, looking at Moon, the dagger embedded in her chest, he knew it was all terribly true.

"Paaaathetic," Hailstorm droned, suddenly standing on the other side of Moon's body as Winter sobbed. "All of you. Simply pathetic. Oh, and that chubby SeaWing wants to talk to you."
That snapped Winter out of it, and he gently set Moon's limp head down on the ground, looking at her once more, before he hurried over to Turtle, the frostbreath coating his entire chest by now. He kneeled down by the nearly dead dragon.
"What is it?" he asked quietly. He knew he didn't seem as sad to see Turtle dying, but it wouldn't matter in a few moments, anyway.
"Winter...you need to take this," Turtle said, handing him a small white piece of some chalky material.
"Is this coral?" he asked. "Why do I need this?"
The light in Turtle's eyes was quickly fading. "Just...go into my sleeping cave and look in the bag next to my bed...there'll be a wooden bowl that you'll need to put together...but once you do..." he broke into a fit of coughing fro several moments. "Put something inside of it and say 'Twice as much, please'."
Winter raised an eyebrow.
"Trust me..." Turtle mumbled, before the life disappeared from his eyes, and he too passed away.
He held back a sob, hearing Hailstorm walking back over to him.
"Are you done?" he asked. He nudged Turtle's body with his tail.
"Yep."
"I'm going to kill you..." Winter muttered quietly.
"Hm? How about you speak up, little brother? Can't quiet hear you."
Winter jumped up and shoved Hailstorm to the ground. "I'M GOING TO KILL YOU!" he screamed, not even smiling as his brother backed up against a tree, seeming quite shocked by his outburst.
"Then do it," Hailstorm hissed, tossing the spear at him. Winter caught it, and his brother grabbed the sharp end and brought it up to his own throat. "Kill me, Winter."
What?
He pressed the end firmly against his brother's neck, telling himself he could do this. This wasn't his family, not the dragon he'd been closest to for years and years back home. This was evil at its purest, someone who could rip the life away from someone without a second thought.
"I'm gonna do it," Winter said.
Hailstorm just stared at him.
"I'm not kidding," he said, hating that his voice was shaking. "I'm

gonna kill you. You'll never be able to walk on this continent ever again, and you can never kill a single dragon from now on."
"Get on with it then."
Winter's arms shaking, he aimed the spear at the white IceWing's throat, brought it back a little so he could pierce his neck with enough force to instantly kill him...
And tossed the spear away.
"I...I can't do it..." he said, fresh tears filling his eyes, carving a path through the mud stains on his ice blue scales as they trickled down his face.

His brother laughed victoriously. "I told you; you just don't have it in you."

"You're right. I don't have it in me to be a stone-hearted maniac racist who everyone is afraid of because he went on a killing spree," Winter shot back.

Hailstorm rolled his eyes. "If that was an insult, it was poorly executed." He stood up and retireved the spear from the ground, then held it up to Winter's chest. "Up against the tree. Now."

He did as his brother told him, not caring if he died at this point. If there was an afterlife, he'd get to see his friends again, at least.

"If you're going to kill me, make it quick," he said. "It's the least you could do."

Hailstorm grinned menacingly. "Oh I'm not going to kill you..." he said, beckoning Karma over from where she stood crying over the loss of their friends. The crippled hybrid walked over, and he shoved the spear into her talons. "She is."

"What?!" Karma asked. "This was never part of the plan!"

Hailstorm ignored her.

Winter wiped the tears from his eyes. If he was going down, he was going to do it gallantly. "Bet you didn't see your little partnership leading to every one of our friends being killed, huh Karma? Is this what you wanted?" He gestured with a sweep of his wing to the bodies strewn across the clearing.

"No, not at all," she said, tears spilling from her eyes.

"Then what did you want?" Winter hissed, more angry at her than anyone else, even his brother.

She hesitated, before saying "For you to love me."

"And you thought working with this psycho to get Moon killed would get me to love you?"

"He promised me he would convince you to like me if I helped

him..."

Hailstorm pushed her roughly. "Get on with it. You were nothing but a pawn in my plan; I was never going to help you. You really thought that just because his girlfriend would get captured meant he would come crawling to YOU of all dragons? You're a crippled freak," he snarled, lifting up her wing, only to let it fall limply against her side. "Now KILL HIM."

A tiny sob escaped her throat, and she positioned the spear at Winter's chest. "I'm so sorry..."

He braced himself, closing his eyes as he awaited the cold embrace of death. However, it never came.

He felt a slight rush of air hit him as Karma swung the spear, then a wet THUNK and the sound of a body falling to the ground. His eyes snapped open to see Hailstorm, the spear entering his chest and exiting through his back as he bled out, his dark blue blood mixing with the mud to create a disgusting purple mixture all around him.

Winter forced himself not to cry, as for a brief moment, he saw a flash of the old Hailstorm, an innocent one who would never kill another dragon unless he had no other choice. A carefree one, who put on a happy face to cheer others up even if something was killing him inside. The one Winter had prayed to somehow be alive for so long, only to find he'd been mentally broken over time, turned into a psychopathic killer that he could barely recognize.

His dying brother reached out a talon toward him, and he took it, holding it for a few seconds until Hailstorm's grip went limp and his pulse died, along with the rest of him.

It was then that he let the dams overflow, tears free-falling as the crushing realization that he had nobody left who cared about him hit him. Of course there was Karma, but he could never forgive her for this, or feel the same way she did.

"I-" the hybrid started to say, but Winter didn't let her finish.

"Just go..." he told her, his voice lacking emotion as he stared at the lifeless body of his brother. "You've done enough to hurt me today."

He heard her choke on a sob, but only glanced her way for a moment when she went bounding away, leaving him to do his own crying over the ones he'd lost this night.

Boom. That's how you write an emotional chapter. Sorry this

one was so long, but there was a lot of detail and stuff to squeeze into one section. If you start reading this and get bored, please come back to it later, I spent like three hours - not all at once - writing this. Anyway, I look forward to reading your comments, and I hope you'll stick around for the end of this story. Seriously, I'm thinking only one more chapter and maybe an epilogue. Then again I don't think there's much need for an epilogue with the ending I have planned. PEACE!

❄Chapter 27: Ice at Midnight❄

Ok, before you ask, I've decided that I'm not writing an epilogue for this (this was written close to the end of me writing this chapter) Also I can't exactly remember how Turtle's stick of coral worked, like if it was a vessel for his powers or something, but just don't give me a hard time if I'm wrong. Anyway, I know you guys will enjoy the ending to this story!

In all his life, Winter had never been so lonely.
He cried himself to sleep when he returned to his empty sleeping cave, piling some of the moss and leaves from Moonwatcher's bed onto his ledge, since they held her scent, and she was what had really kept him going throughout the year, when everything had seemed hopeless and when it seemed the whole world was against him. Those leaves were the only reminder of her he had left, and they were the reason he was able to get what little sleep he did.
Winter woke in the morning expecting to see Moon stirring in her sleep over on her bed, or to hear Kinkajou and Sparrow gossiping in their cave. The only dragon left that he was familiar with was Karma, but he wanted nothing to do with her ever again after the way she'd betrayed them all.
It was hard to believe they were really gone; it was never this quiet in their caves. Heck, he even missed the occasional argument with Qibli over stupid, insignificant things.
He sat up, removing a leaf stuck to one of his horns, fiddling with the half heart necklace he'd left on the floor. The chain had snapped during the events that had taken place several hours ago, and he'd found it caked in mud in the clearing. Just looking at it brought a fresh stream of tears flowing down his face as he remembered how happy Moon had been when he'd given her the other necklace with the other half of the silver heart.
"Good morning, Winter," came a bellow-ish voice from the door. He looked up and saw Clay, the big MudWing having to lower his

head to fit it inside the cave. "Karma came and told me about...everything. I'm truly sorry for all your losses, and even more sorry we couldn't figure out that your brother was behind these disappearances before he did his damage."

Winter didn't reply, silently staring down at the necklace in his claws.

Clay didn't seem annoyed, thankfully. "I know what it's like to love someone," he said quietly. "I can't imagine how hard it would be to lose them, but I just want you to know that we plan to hold a funeral for everyone who has died here recently. It's going to be in a few hours, if you're interested."

Of course I'm interested you food-obsessed idiot. They're my friends. And my brother.

"Even for Hailstorm?" he asked, looking up to meet Clay's amber eyes.

"Even for Hailstorm," the MudWing confirmed with a nod, the anger evident in his voice. "I talked to all the teachers, and they agreed that you were doing well enough that the only school work you'll need to do is the final tests for each class at the end of the year. If you would like, you can leave the academy until then, if you need to figure things out or something, but you're welcome here all the same."

Winter just nodded, not quite sure what to do anymore. All his friends were dead, and the only dragon he knew well enough to consider a friend had betrayed them all, not even lifting a claw to stop Hailstorm when he'd gone on his rampage in that clearing.

After Clay left, he remembered that he'd left Moon's necklace and wristband in the clearing, as well as Turtle's stick of coral. He mainly wanted the accessories from Moon, as it would give him a couple of things to remember her by, but the stick of coral had seemed pretty important to Turtle too, so he might as well pick it up while he was there.

Although Winter was sick of all the death he'd seen lately, he had to go back and get those things. So he did, climbing out of the still-broken window and flying off to the muddy clearing.

When he arrived, he almost started crying again as he saw the carnage and all the bodies. Those of Moon and Hailstorm pained him most when he looked at them; they had been the two closest dragons in his life, and now they were lifeless, the spark gone from their eyes. He had still been having doubts that they were all really

dead, until now. There was no way any of them could be alive. Winter first walked over to Turtle, picking up the pale piece of coral next to his faded body, wiping the mud off, before he then went over to Moonwatcher, his claws sinking deep into the mud, just like his heart into the pits of despair that came when someone you loved was lost. He knew this, because he'd felt the same feeling before, when everyone had thought his brother was dead. Now, he really was.

He gingerly slipped the wristband off of Moon's cold arm, then lifted her head up and removed the necklace, gently setting it back down with tears in his eyes. He noticed something that he hadn't last night, his vision mostly obscured by the darkness; her left wing was clearly broken.

I don't think I'll ever be able to love again...this is what happens, this is why I always stay away from dragons. If I become their friend, or more, like with Moon, I'll just end up having my heart broken one way or another. But never again...I never needed friends in the first place, and I sure don't need new ones...I don't WANT new ones...

Winter just knelt down by Moonwatcher for a few moments, holding her talon in both of his, then finally let go and flew back toward the academy, wiping his tears away. The sun was out this morning, as if mocking him with its natural air of positivity. Not a cloud was in sight. He wished it would be overcast for a week; if he was going to feel sad, alone, and depressed, he didn't want the rest of the world to be aglow with happiness.

He climbed back into his cave through the cold window frame, laid the pieces of jewelry he'd recovered from Moon on his ledge, then went into the cave Turtle, Qibli, and Carnelian had shared. He'd only been in here a few times, but it was nothing special. There were two stone ledges, one of which Qibli had picked since it was often in full sunlight, and then a shallow, dragon-sized pool where Turtle slept.

I don't see anything NEXT to his bed...maybe it's inside? He looked inside the pool, and saw that Turtle must've misspoken.. There was a brown satchel, sealed tight, resting at the bottom of the pool.

I hope he never peed in this water," he thought as he retrieved the sopping wet bag and set it on the floor, as well as the white stick of coral. Winter opened up the bag and found three large wooden pieces, almost like those of a jigsaw puzzle, but they were curved. When he slid them together, they formed a large bowl. There was

also a spoon inside the bag, probably to go along with the bowl, but he was pretty sure he didn't need it for whatever Turtle wanted him to do.

'Put something in the bowl and say "Twice as much, please", he remembered the SeaWing telling him several agonizing hours ago. Winter picked up the piece of coral and placed it inside the bowl, wondering if this was all some elaborate prank. If it was, he would probably cry. Again.

"Twice as much, please," the IceWing whispered, not expecting anything to happen. That's why he was astonished, and also a bit weirded out, when the stick of coral suddenly duplicated right before his eyes. At first, he had no clue why this witchcraft, or magic, or whatever it was had happened. However, he started piecing together the clues bit by bit, starting with how Turtle had seemed so relieved when he'd been informed that Moon's mind-reading didn't work on him. He'd seemed just a little *too* relieved. It took him a little more than a minute, but he was able to figure out how Turtle had access to this kind of thing.

Turtle was an Animus.

I wonder what this piece of coral does...if it does anything at all...maybe I can, I don't know, make a wish with it or something? Hm...

He scratched his head in thought, then realized as he touched one of his horns that it was broken. Part of it must've snapped off last night.

I wish my horn wasn't broken anymore.

He waited a few moments to give the magic time to work, if it even needed any, before feeling his horn again. His heart accelerated when he realized it was good as new, smoother than seal skin and as sharp as a dagger at the end.

I guess Turtle wasn't as boring as I thought...WAIT A SECOND! This means...I can bring them all back!

(Approximately five minutes and many tears of joy later...)

Winter and his twin sister Icicle stood just outside of the front entrance of Jade Mountain Academy, standing on the landing platform they'd arrived her on months ago, painful months, happy months, crazy and absurd months...months that had gone by way too fast. Resting on the ground several feet in front of them, were an assortment of items, items that would mean nothing to someone

not associated with the dragons they belonged to: Moonwatcher's black-and-emerald armband, Qibli's amber earring, a list of potential couples that Winter had found in Sparrow's collection, Turtle's bag of Animus-touched objects, a ruby Carnelian had found and kept during hunting one day, a sloppy drawing of a sloth Kinkajou had made while doodling in class, a set of brass knuckles that belonged to Bigtail - Winter had asked her beforehand if there were any items he had been fond of or that meant something to him -, a stubby pencil that had been sharpened so much it was barely bigger than an eraser for Mightyclaws, and finally, a scale off of Mindreader's body.

Winter had thought about bringing Hailstorm back, but based on the words he planned to use to resurrect the rest of the fallen dragons, it would only bring back the mentally broken Hailstorm, not the one that had been missing for so many years. And even though it hurt worse than that saltwater crocodile bite had early on in the year, he couldn't do that to everyone else.

He looked at Icicle, standing to his right, her blue eyes bloodshot and puffy from the amount of tears she had shed. She'd cried most of them when Winter had told her he and the rest of his winglet had discovered the horrible fate that had befallen Bigtail and the other two NightWings killed by his brother, and then some tears of joy when she found out he would be able to bring them all back. She didn't even try denying anymore the fact that she loved Bigtail; it was too obvious.

"You think you can pull yourself together?" he asked. "It'd be a shame if you were crying so much you couldn't see what's about to happen."

Icicle punched him in the shoulder. "Shut up; you cried too. I can still tell from how sore your eyes look."

Winter grinned, then looked to his left, where Karma stood, not meeting anybody's gaze. She was still ashamed for what she'd done, but they had both agreed it would be appreciated if she was present when all their friends were brought back to life. He then looked behind him, where the rest of the dragons in the academy, staff and students alike, waited patiently inside for that to happen.

He took one last look at all the objects set out before them, Moonwatcher's armband and Bigtail's brass knuckles in the very front, before he closed his eyes, the original stick of coral held tightly in his claws.

When I let go of this piece of coral and it hits the ground, the dragons represented by these objects in front of me will be brought back from the dead, without any injuries, and they will still retain all of their memories, he thought, making sure to be as specific as he could, before he let go of the coral, his eyes still shut until he heard it hit the ground.

Can Animus magic even bring dragons back from the dead? Is that a thing? Will this even work, or is there a limit on how much power that piece of coral can use? came a few rushed and frantic thoughts, Winter's eyes still closed, desperately hoping with all his heart that this would work.

A loud cheer from the crowd of dragons still inside told him it must have, and his eyes snapped open, relief and happiness flooding through him when he saw each and every dragon that had died here recently standing in front of him, Icicle, and Karma. The one he cared about most, though, was Moonwatcher, whose jade green eyes were staring right back at his, a full smile on her face as she suddenly ran toward him, not even bothering to put on her armband first as she leaped into his arms.

Winter wore a grin to match the size of hers as he felt her smooth scales against him once again, lifting her up in the air for a moment and spinning both of them around, before coming to a stop, his vision spinning so much from dizziness that he nearly dropped her on accident. Moon was happily laughing, a sound he hadn't heard in what felt like an eternity, but one he missed dearly with all his heart, only second to the sound of her voice. They tried to kiss each other, but missed horribly with both of them being so dizzy, which only added to her laughter. Winter laughed as well, waiting until his vision corrected itself before he tried again. This time, he didn't miss.

They probably would've kissed longer than a second or two had they not been in front of the entire school, but it didn't matter to him. The dragon who made him happy, gave him that strange fluttery feeling in his chest like no other, was back in his life, and that was all that mattered.

Winter eventually set Moon down on the ground, but she refused to quit hugging him, practically squeezing the air out of his lungs.

"I don't know how," she said, her soft voice like music to his ears, "but you did it, Winter."

He hugged her too, not wanting this moment to ever end. "I had

help from a certain SeaWing," he said, looking beyond the heads of several dragons at Turtle, who was hugging his sister Anemone, Kinkajou looking more than a little peeved that he wasn't hugging her instead.
Moon looked at him strangely. "Turtle?"
"I'll explain everything later."
"You better, because I have no clue how- OW!" the small NightWing exclaimed, whimpering in pain. He looked down, and saw that she had stepped on her left wing. A wing that was supposed to be healed.
"Why is your wing still broken?" Winter asked, talking to himself more than anybody. "I swear I did everything right..."
"Winter!" Qibli suddenly shouted. He looked up and saw the SandWing storming over to him. "How dare you touch my earring! It could've broken!" he said jokingly, walking over and playfully punching him in the shoulder. "Seriously though, glad you worked out how to bring us back." His face then turned to a mask of confusion. "How did you bring us back, exactly?"
"Go get everyone else; I don't want to have to explain this more than once..."

(Lots of confused dragons and several hours later...)

Two dragons were perched on a small cliff, hundreds of feet above the heart of Jade Mountain. The larger of the two was ice blue, his scales polished to the point that it looked like he was MADE of ice. The second, smaller dragon was an entirely different story. Her scales were as dark as the night itself, aside from a few hints of different colors and tiny silver scales on her sides here and there. The female's green eyes practically glowed in the soft moonlight, as well as a sparkly, silver, teardrop-shaped scale next to each one. Her wings - one healthy and working as a dragon's wing should, the other bent at an awkward angle drooping at her side - were dotted with tiny white speckles, as if pieces of the nighttime sky had decided that this was where they would stay.
Despite that the two dragons were near polar opposites, the thing they most had in common was their love for one another.
Winter felt Moon snuggle into his side as they observed the still sky above, pointing out different stars and constellations to each other. They weren't out her for any specific reason, just wanting to spend

some time with each other after the scarring events they'd both been through.
"I still can't believe none of us figured out Turtle's secret," Moon said to him, her smooth, glossy scales rubbing against his side as she shifted a little. "It's a good thing he told you about the bowl."
"Yeah, otherwise I would've been lonelier than...uh...a lonely guy."
"We still need to work on your comparisons," the NightWing said, her head resting on his shoulder.
"For sure," Winter agreed. "I wish there would've been enough magic in that piece of coral so that your wing would be fixed, though."
That was the reason why Moonwatcher's wing was still broken; apparently there was only a limited amount of Animus magic stored in Turtle's stick of coral, reserved only for emergencies. There had been enough to bring everyone back alive totally healthy and fine, aside from her.
"I'd much rather be alive with a permanently broken wing than dead," she replied. "I'm never gonna be able to fly again, though...that's what I'm going to miss most."
It was true. She'd seen the nurse about her wing earlier, and they'd told her that her wing was broken in a way that couldn't be repaired. The pain would fade after a week or two, but Moonwatcher's wing would be forever unusable.
Winter saw tears coming to her eyes, and wrapped his wing around her to comfort her. "You know Turtle could just use his magic to heal it, right?"
"I asked him, but he said he doesn't use his powers unless he has to. Doesn't want his soul becoming corrupt."
"I bet I can make him reconsider..." Winter said, an edge to his voice.
"Winter, please...it's fine."
He took his eyes off the sky to look at her. "But you just said you'll miss being able to fly."
"That doesn't mean I want to risk losing a friend just to get that back," she told him.
He sighed. "You're too perfect for me."
"No, *you're* too perfect for *me*." Moon said a bit stubbornly.
Winter didn't persist, knowing this would continue forever if he did. "I'm just glad you're still around so we can share moments like this."
She smiled. "You have *no idea* what it means to be glad..."

After a few moments, he had a crazy idea that just might work.
"I have a crazy idea that just might work," he said, standing up. "What if we both fly, but at the same time?"
Moon just stared at him a moment. "Okay, I think it's time for bed..."
"No, I'm serious!" he said, getting excited by the fact that this could work. "If I wrap my right wing around you, and we both flap our other wings at once, we can probably fly together!"
"Sounds like a stretch...and we're on top of a cliff! What happens if it doesn't work?" Moon asked.
"Then we both fall to our deaths and can live happily-ever-after in the afterlife," he said. "Come on, what have we got to lose?"
"Our lives...wow, I really sound like you right now, but fine." Moon walked over to the edge of the cliff, and he joined her, wrapping his right wing firmly around her and pulling her as close to him as possible. "If we die, I'm gonna be really angry at you!"
Winter ignored that comment. "Alright, on three, we fly," he said confidently. "One, two...three!"
The pair jumped, and flew through the cool night air, the wind curving around them both as they flapped their wings in unison. For about five seconds, until gravity took control and they fell down about thirty feet into a heavily forested area. They definitely would've perished had a few tree branches not broken their fall, but now they laid in a heap on the ground, laughing at their own failure like crazed hyenas.

"It's a start," Winter said, Moon resting on top of him, her bad wing drooping pitifully at her side. "We'll work on it."

She nodded, placing her front paws on his chest and looking down at him. "Next time, we'll do it over a nice, flat plain though, and very close to the ground."

"Agreed." The ground felt unusually cold tonight, and as he tried to sit up, his talons slid against something smooth and he fell back down on his back. He turned his head to look at the ground, and saw that there was ice on it. Was it really that cold out?

Moon reached down and touched the ice for a second. "I've never actually seen this much ice in real life before. It's even colder than you!"

"Yeah," Winter said. "Ice at midnight."

And then, they shared a soft kiss under the stars, right where they belonged: with each other.

———————————————————————————The end
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(Thanks to all of you for reading this story; it's turned out to be my most popular one yet, by a good couple thousand of you. To even have this many readers is...more than amazing, so even if you just read the story and never commented - which is most of you - I still really appreciate that you took the time out of your life to stick around. It warms my heart to know that so many people from different parts of the world can unite under the fact that Winterwatcher is and always will be the greatest WoF ship ever. Don't expect much from me for the next week or so, I'm gonna take some time away from worrying about my next story. After that I'll probably need to plan things regarding my next story for at least another week. It's not a Wings of Fire related story, but it is about dragons. Anyway, I hope you'll all check it out, keep tabs on my account page for any updates on what it will be called or when it'll be released. Cataclysm138, out!)

Final Thoughts

I don't really know what to title this part but I think this works well enough lol. For those who don't know, I left Wattpad for a hot minute (as in 4 or 5 years) after finishing this story, and I just recently came back to start writing again. I wanted to give a few words and just some of my thoughts after coming back.

First, I know what question is on a lot of your minds: *Will there be a sequel to Ice at Midnight?*

The answer is pretty much no. While I was gone from Wattpad I still wrote off and on, and discovered that I really enjoy doing my own worldbuilding and writing entirely original stories, which is what I plan on doing from now on. **If you want to read any of my new stuff, check out The Solace Chronicles, which has some published parts already!** It's where I'm dumping all of the short stories I've written lately as I focus more on a larger project I have in the works. Anyway, I also don't know if I could do a sequel justice since I'm not nearly as invested in WoF as I was when I was a teen (yes I'm in my twenties now- officially hit unc status a while back). Never say never, but I most likely won't be coming back to writing WoF fanfiction.

With that question answered, I guess the main thing I wanted to say is just a massive, massive thank-you to everyone who's read this story and Frigid Shadows over the years. I remember when I first finished writing Ice at Midnight and was so hyped to see that it had around 20k reads; six years later and it absolutely skyrocketed to 133k as of writing this. Somehow it's also still hovering around the top 10 stories for winterwatcher fanfics after all this time, which blows my mind. And reading all your comments has been lovely too! I couldn't possibly get to them all with how many there are now, but I know you guys have been so supportive and seem to really enjoy my writing. Even though I cringe a bit looking back at how I used to write, I'm glad it continues to make people happy

because that's why I started publishing stuff here in the first place.

So genuinely, thank you to every single one of you. I mean it.

Cataclysm138, out.

(p.s. sorry if the text formatting of the last few chapters got screwed up lmao. I'm gonna leave it as-is, I think it adds to the vibe)